

From Darkness

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From Darkness

by [HaroThar](#)

Summary

Ranboo's been a slave for all his life (or at least, as long as he can remember). When a chance encounter with a wanted criminal ends with him cohabitating a cabin in the north, his life gets turned on its head as he is made to find a new life, home, and identity for himself.

Technoblade and Philza are kind to him, though, and gently help him through the process. As gently as two war criminals can, anyway.

Notes

This is, *obviously*, roleplay characters only. Updates Sundays

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ranboo had been a slave for—he couldn't remember how long. As long as he could remember. It didn't matter. He'd been a slave for long enough that he should know better, he *should* know better, he shouldn't keep messing up like this, he shouldn't still need correcting over and over again like a brain damaged whelp that would be better off dragged out back and shot in the—

He stumbled, and it was his fault, because he wasn't paying attention, because he was thinking (and he should know better than to assume his brain was any good for *thinking*) and he knew that when his master was taking him places he needed to stay *vigilant* because his master wouldn't waste his time making sure his idiot slave was paying attention like he was supposed to and—

He couldn't even remember what he was in trouble for, and that was terrible, because he likely hadn't had time to write it down so now he'd *never* remember and he'd never learn and he'd never get any better and he'd always be this stupid useless clumsy slave and his master would keep on having to punish him and—

He hated being punished he hated being locked in the dark and cold and once the door was shut it was *pitch* black in there and Ranboo's mind would start making up fake shapes and whispering fake words and then he would *really* start to—

“Why I even keep you,” Master groused loudly, flinging open the door to the holding cell and throwing Ranboo in, and Ranboo was so bad at what was expected of him because he yelped and stumbled again and his knees made an unhappy crack as they came down hard on the solid, unforgiving stone of the cold cell but—

His lord's estate was not an overly large one. There was only one cell for naughty slaves and prisoners alike. Normally it was Ranboo's to inhabit and Ranboo's alone, the ominous metal cuffs welded to the walls open and unused, but, but—

Before the door slammed shut behind him, the heavy thud of metal locking into place signalling the start of his stay, Ranboo saw another man in the cell. A *large* man, with a skull for a mask and broad shoulders, his clothes bloodied and his neck and wrists secured to the walls by the shackles there. His posture forced perfectly upright, unable to slouch or lean forward without suffocating himself, unable to move his wrists even a single inch, actually *locked* in the cell. Like he was dangerous. Like he was important.

“I'm sorry,” Ranboo breathed into the blackness, for the thousandth time that day. “I—I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,” he whispered, muttered, over and over, shaking where he'd fallen, shuffling fruitlessly with just his legs, his hands clamped over his head. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I—” He couldn't breathe right. Hadn't been able to breathe since his master had found him doing ____ and had struck him across the face and yelled ____ and Ranboo had tried to apologize but—

He couldn't breathe, he couldn't breathe, he could never breathe in the cell (right? He couldn't remember) but someone else was there too now and he was so sorry, to annoy this man as well, to be a panicky little nuisance who should know better he should know better why didn't he know better by now he was sorry he's sorry so sorry so sorry sorry sorry—

He was vocalizing again, he knew better than to vocalize, he knew how his Ender sounds caused the hair on the necks of Real People to stand on end and how obnoxious his panicked hissing grunts were and that he should have better control but he couldn't breathe and he couldn't think and he couldn't *stop* and if he wasn't vocalizing he was apologizing and he knew he was annoying which he's so sorry for he's so so sorry—

“Hey, try taking a deep breath, kid.”

Ranboo tried. He truly, genuinely tried. He'd been given an order, and he knew he needed to follow those, so he tried so hard to obey. He couldn't, not when his lungs wouldn't fill right and his dizzy mind kept slipping, wouldn't focus, like gripping at a slime-coated rock in a riverbed, unable to find purchase. But he tried. Nether he was so sorry.

“Just keep working on it; you'll get there.”

So Ranboo kept working on it. He didn't work himself up so bad he passed out from too little air, and he didn't linger in his panic as long as he normally did (he was pretty sure. It *felt* like he stopped panicking faster than he normally did, when it was just him alone in the dark). He even... calmed down, a little. He was pretty sure. Yeah, yeah, no, he was, he felt calmer. Tentatively, he uncurled, just slightly, just so that his muscles weren't all wound tight as springs and the blackness of the cold room could touch a little more of him.

“You're sounding a little better,” the man said, and Ranboo lifted his face towards the voice. It. Sounded almost like praise.

Was he encouraging him?

“Thank you,” Ranboo whispered, swallowing down an Ender vocalization, “Th-thanks to you, thank you, thank you sir.” Ranboo hedged, just a little, just a tiny bit, closer to the man, shuffling towards another body, another person, someone who'd been, been—

Ranboo's hand accidentally brushed up against body-warmed cloth, a leg or maybe boot, some part of the man, and he lept back like a startled cat, so hard that his back and skull hit the hard stone of the cell wall. He let out a small, pained noise, half whimper half vocalization, before launching back into apologies again.

“I'm sorry,” he gasped as quickly as he could, a throbbing in the back of his skull from where it had connected with the stone but it was irrelevant in the face of his stupid, fumbling, clumsy, worthless little self. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry sir—”

“Keep workin' on the deep breath thing, kid.”

“I'm sorry!”

“It's fine,” the man said, like it really was, like he didn't actually care that Ranboo had touched him. “C'mon back over. I don't mind.”

“I, I,” Ranboo quickly remembered that talking and breathing weren't exactly compatible at the moment, and the man had told him to breathe, hadn't asked him any direct questions. Breathe, breathe, the priority had to be on breathing, he, he was so sorry.

“It’s cold in here,” the man mentioned, sounding almost idle. Except that couldn’t be right, because he was chained by the neck and secured around the wrists, and bloodstained, and, yes, cold. He was right. It was always cold in here. “I wouldn’t mind if someone who, y’know, isn’t interested in killing me gets close.”

The man cleared his throat, unable to see Ranboo’s stricken face, his green eye the only (faint) light in the dark.

“Conserving body heat, you know.”

“I, you, really?” Ranboo asked, a gasped breath between each disbelieving word.

“Come on over.”

Ranboo hesitated. But, but that had been an order, so, so he *had* to obey, right? He started to move, hesitated again, body tense as a hare, then slowly, tremulously approached again. He flinched when his own hand came down on the cold stone, twitched again as his knees shuffled forward.

When his hand brushed again against the man’s leg, he jerked, even though this is what he should be doing, he *should* be, he’d been ordered to, the man was cold, Ranboo was, Ranboo was—

He set his hand against the man’s thigh, trembling in the black. He was—so warm. Ranboo marvelled at the warmth in the room that shouldn’t, typically, have it. He nudged closer. Then closer still. His knee pressed against the man’s thigh. Then climbed, shaking and stunned, into the man’s lap, his *warm* legs activating something in Ranboo’s stupid, hole-filled head that made him crave, *need*, he, he had to, closer, he wanted, this man was—

“Hey!” the man snapped when Ranboo used his shoulder to lift himself up, and Ranboo launched off him like his life depended on it. Like the man was his master, hand raised with the switch between white knuckles and Ranboo could only pray that if he acted fast enough he might reduce the pain that was surely coming—

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry I’m so sorry I’m so sorry I’m so so sorry sir I’m sorry I’m *sorry*—” he whined, tears budding in his eyes and stinging at his skin, a pain that would be inconsequential in the face of what he knew would inevitably follow.

“S fine,” the man grunted. “Just try not to move my torso, kid. I’ve got a severely limited amount of windpipe goin’ on here.”

He’d *hurt* him! It was, unforgivable, useless, worthless Ranboo, he couldn’t believe he’d hurt someone, that he’d dared—and someone who’d been *kind* to him!

“Bruuuuh,” the man said, Ranboo jolting with a soft, choked off whine. He was being noisy, wasn’t he? Vocalizing. Probably being obnoxious, annoying enough that man was irate. He wrapped his hands over his mouth and screwed his eyes shut tight, tears stinging behind one eyelid.

But, but the man, he’d, he’d said it was fine, and, and he was *warm* and hadn’t hurt Ranboo or yelled at him or even really chastised him for his blunder. And. And Ranboo was scared, but, couldn’t seem to stop himself from moving closer, again, and touching the man’s leg, again, and curling across the man’s lap, taking great care not to touch anything other than his legs, despite the fact that Ranboo couldn’t see, and was just a useless, clumsy slave.

He tried to stop vocalizing. It would be easier to do if the man hit him, or, well, kicked him, in this instance, since his hands were restrained and he couldn't properly correct Ranboo's behavior. He pressed his face as hard as he dared into the warm fabric of the man's pants and draped his thin tail over his ankles, curled in tight and clinging like a stupid, foolish child. Well. He guessed that's all he actually was, in a way. A stupid, obnoxious waste of space.

But he could be good for this, at least. Sharing body heat. With a kind man who didn't yell at him. Ranboo could be still and sort of warm and not pull on his torso and try his best not to annoy him with strange, inhuman sounds.

His body was still taut with anxiety but the longer he laid curled over the man's lap, the less... frantic he felt. He hoped--he hoped he would remember this. Maybe. At least part of it, some small part of this time. He could remember so very, very little, his life a blur that only existed in the moment, but he wanted to remember this.

Maybe if he was very well behaved after he was let out, his master would let him quickly scribble down a note in his journal. That would be amazing.

He was too high-strung to drift off or even doze, but he did hit a strange... plateau, a little while in. The man didn't try to speak to him (and why would he? Ranboo was little more than an animal), and so Ranboo's mind... faded into a pleasant haze. Well, as pleasant as it could, while he was locked in pitch blackness and his master was angry with him, somewhere beyond the door.

Some hours later, though shorter than Ranboo was usually left in, the heavy thud of the lock sent Ranboo skittering off the man's lap and back into the corner, any peace he'd acquired gone in a moment's notice. His heart pounded in his ears, breathing labored, feet slipping against the stone as he vainly attempted to compress himself further into the frigid corner, eyes wide and stinging as light poured in and made him whimper.

"Alright you filthy criminal," Ranboo's master spat, ignoring Ranboo entirely and focusing on the kind man. "Time's up."

"Oh, great, I've been waiting," he said mildly, and Ranboo winced as his master's foot crashed directly into the man's stomach, making him seize.

"Think you're a real funny man, don't you?"

"I'm told it's one of my best qualities," he wheezed tightly. Ranboo closed his eyes, but still heard the slap, and slight shift in chains as the man's neck was forced to the side, even with the collar and restraints binding him in place.

Ranboo stayed curled tightly in the corner as his master and two other men shackled the man's ankles and wrists and chained them to a cinch around his waist. Ranboo didn't recognize one man, but the other he remembered as... someone... someone important. Someone who was important in the hierarchy of the city. Probably.

When they dragged the kind man to his feet and shoved him out the door, Ranboo quickly jolted to his feet and followed close on his master's heels, skittering anxiously just within arm's reach. His master was part of the group, and usually when the door opened he was supposed to follow, and really, what else was he supposed to do? It wasn't like he wanted to stay trapped in the cell.

Ranboo might have vomited if he'd eaten anything recently, because as he silently followed along behind his master, he realized that they'd set up an *execution block* in the yard.

Ranboo had been whipped there, more than plenty of times, tied to the imposing wooden post that now supported something far worse. He'd seen slaves and misbehaving servants punished on this dirt. But he'd never witnessed someone die. He'd never seen a wooden stand with a head-sized chopping block hastily erected.

His anxiety buzzed like swarming insects in his brain. The first kind person Ranboo could remember meeting, and he was going to be killed while onlookers watched. While Ranboo watched. But what could Ranboo do? He was thin as reeds and just about as breakable, trained to *obey* and nothing else.

His master forced him to his knees by his master's seat, Ranboo cowered low to the dirt. His eyes darted anxiously over those gathered in the yard, some sitting, some standing, all of them creating a cloud of malaise that spoke of violence to come. Anger. A buzzing in the air.

They were here for blood and they would receive it. Ranboo lifted his head to stare at the kind man.

He was chained to the large wooden pole Ranboo was familiar with by one wrist, chained to a matching, new pole by the other. His ankles were left chained together, the cinch around his waist now rendered obsolete, and his head forced down over the block, a stranger's fist in the man's long pink hair.

Many words were said. Some were spoken out, loud to the crowd, clearly meant for show. Others were spat against the man's ominous mask, the dark shadows over his eyes making Ranboo feel almost watched. Haunted. At one point someone slapped him. At another, a crown was mockingly thrown before the block, the man's ears perking and twisting as the shining metal clattered against the stand.

Ranboo watched, trembling and nauseous, as accusation after accusation was levelled at the man. Theft, property damage, murder, slaughter, each crime was greater than the one before it. At no point was the man asked to speak, or given opportunity to defend himself.

This wasn't meant to be a trial.

The executioner wore a rough mask, cloth that could be bloodstained without concern, and in his hands was a daunting axe. Heavy, large, *sharp*. Once again someone fisted a hand in the kind man's hair and forced his head down against the wood, and Ranboo felt the familiar burn of tears against his skin.

He didn't want to watch, but he couldn't look away. Like every other awful, horrible, inevitable thing that happened in this place. Or, maybe not, Ranboo couldn't remember any specific instance of watching terrible things happen. He just, he was pretty sure it was right, that he didn't look away. He couldn't remember.

The axe was lifted, and Ranboo's tears spilled over, silent so his master wouldn't send him up next, his eyes wide, but—

The wooden pole, the old one, the one that had bore the weight of countless ill-behaved slaves, had weathered unknown storms and rain—

It. It got.

The kind man *ripped it out*, the executioner's axe colliding with metal chain, and suddenly he had one arm free and a destabilized stand where the pole had crashed into hasty wood.

The man got one good solid punch to the face of the executioner, and then the axe was in *his* hand and the other chain was snapped, then the chain connecting his ankles, and everyone around Ranboo was *screaming*, yelling, some running towards the man, far more running away. Bowstrings were pulled but the arrows missed the man, who launched himself into the crowd of people (the very people who wanted him dead, the very people trying to kill him) and the archers suddenly risked hurting far more people than just the man.

And it was the strangest thing, almost in slow motion but simultaneously too fast for Ranboo to track. It was just. Truly baffling. Because Ranboo suddenly found himself grabbed, lifted, and hauled over the man's shoulder.

And Ranboo. He. He wasn't, good at things. In general. Even on a good day, when his stress levels were low (at least, he was pretty sure that was how it worked). There was a lot of chaos happening. Lots of sounds, and motion, and none of it really managed to register with Ranboo until he was suddenly inside the stable and he was crumpled in a pile of hay, the man barricading the stable doors.

Ranboo wasn't very bright. He was actually pretty stupid, which, he was fairly confident he'd been told of, multiple times. Enough times to remember. But he was present enough to get to his feet and help the man with the barricade.

He was pretty sure he was being stolen.

Was he being stolen???

(*Why* would he be stolen?)

It felt like he was being stolen. Which, honestly, he probably should've minded more than he did. But this was a kind man, right? Yes, right, right, he'd been nice to Ranboo. Hadn't he? In the cell! In the cell. Right.

Ranboo glanced to the man, who was... tearing up the stable in places. Ranboo quickly pulled out his notebook, his most prized (and really, only) possession, and quickly scribbled down *man kind in cell, kind touch, almost executed, stole me* and shoved it back into the hiding place Ranboo had sewn into the inside of his shirt. The man either hadn't noticed or hadn't cared.

He was setting down obsidian blocks? Using the newly made space to construct a hollow rectangle? Ranboo was confused. He smelled smoke. There was banging against the stable door. The horses were braying, smelling the smoke too. Ranboo's agitation was making it a little hard to see. A little hard to breathe. But, but the man seemed to know what he was doing, and Ranboo was pretty sure that, if he was his master now, then that would.

Probably be good. Yeah. Probably a good thing. Yeah, yeah, he'd be alright with that, he was pretty sure.

"Let's go," the man ordered, using the chains hanging limply off his wrists to spark a light that warped purple inside the rectangle. The stench of magic overpowered the smell of smoke, and

Ranboo vwooped, loud, too loud to hide. The man, again, did not seem to care. He simply grabbed a horse Ranboo didn't recognize (which could mean anything. Ranboo didn't recognize a lot), and led it through the shimmering, undulating purple. Ranboo. Hm.

Ranboo followed. He was obeying. He was pretty good at obeying, all things considered, especially given the circumstances.

Hm. Okay. That was. A sensation, alright.

It almost struck him as a good thing, that he hadn't eaten in a while. Nothing to risk coming back up.

Huh.

So this was the Nether! He'd heard of it, before, of course he'd heard of it. There was, in fact, a lot of fire.

The man used the now-somewhat-busted-axe to break one of the obsidian blocks, the purple magic shattering like glass, and then mounted the horse he'd—taken? Stolen? Was the horse stolen as well? He'd already stolen Ranboo, so it would make sense he'd also steal something much more useful, like a horse.

The man's hand came down on Ranboo's shirt collar, instead of his actual collar, which startled Ranboo. But he was kind of used to being picked up and hauled around, despite his height, so he naturally went limp at the grip.

But instead of being thrown onto the strange reddish rock or into a lava pit below or even over the rear of the horse, Ranboo was just... sort of settled, onto the horse, right in front of the man. Side-saddle, except the horse wasn't really saddled, or bridled, or anything. Just a bit of rope around its neck, then Ranboo, then the impressively large rider.

Ranboo was used to other people being broader than him. Stronger. Thickly muscled or heavysset. He wasn't exactly used to people being *this* much larger than him. Even the man's height was impressive, hardly shorter than Ranboo at all, compared to most humans.

But the man was a hybrid too. He had pig ears. Pinkish skin. His legs were shaped differently from most humans, and he didn't wear shoes for his hooves.

There was also the skull mask, but Ranboo was pretty sure that didn't actually have anything to do with the man's biology.

Some of the bloodstains on his clothes were fresh.

Hm.

Oh boy.

“Keep your tail out of any lava we pass.”

Oh *boy*.

Ranboo curled his tail up around the man, the tangled and tattered fluff at the end resting near the man's hip. He tried to balance but found it hard once the horse started moving.

“Um, sir, uh, sorry but, um—” His teeth clacked as he shut his mouth, wincing at how *stupid* he sounded. Why did he ever bother opening his mouth at all?

“Yeah?”

“Can I—your torso, since you’re not collared anymore, can—”

“Go ahead.”

Ranboo wrapped his arms around the man’s waist, his much broader arms around Ranboo and gripping the horse by the withers, and Ranboo found he had nowhere to put his face except up against the man’s shoulder.

He smelled like blood and sweat. Ranboo probably should have minded more than he did. Not to say he didn’t mind, because, gosh, this was, absolutely terrible, and terrifying, and a terror, everything, all of it, he should update his memory book soon, before he forgot anything important, because getting stolen was a big deal and he should probably write that down, but, also, this man hadn’t hurt Ranboo yet, that he could remember. Ranboo’s face kind of hurt where it was pressed against the man’s shoulder. But Ranboo got hit pretty often, anyone could have done that. Including the man, he guessed, but also! Anyone else! So it was really up in the air whether this man had hurt him or not. He should write it down. But not, not with the fire everywhere. He couldn’t bear it if his book got burned.

The terrain was awful, here, and more than once the man dismounted to collect the strange red, rocky dirt and build a two-block-wide bridge, ordering Ranboo to stand still and hold the horse by the lead so it didn’t spook or wander off. Which, hh, *oh boy!*

And riding across the bridges! Wow! He hated it so much! Certain death on either side, lava filling the space with a haunting glow. And there were monsters! Zombie pig men and strange white blobs and molten slimes and! Ranboo! Hated this! The man was smart, and good at avoiding the worst of the mobs, but occasionally he would sink the rapidly-deteriorating axe into another creature and Ranboo would shudder and cling to the man’s waist all the tighter.

Ranboo only realized he’d been vocalizing *the whole time* after they’d spent *hours* in the Nether. He briefly considered trying to stop, but his anxiety was already bad enough to distort his vision and leave him lock-limbed, semi-immobile, if he didn’t self-regulate somehow he was pretty sure he would *die*.

It was nothing short of a miracle the man hadn’t brought it up. Ranboo needed to write that down, that he needed to thank the man for his patience with him. Somehow. He’d figure something out.

The terrain slowly shifted, paths already made, stairs that weren’t naturally formed, and eventually smooth stretches that the horse could move quickly across.

At the end of it all was another portal, the magic glow almost friendly compared to everything else Ranboo had witnessed.

The portal left him disoriented, glad that he was technically sitting, *dizzy* in a way that might have been hunger and dehydration, might have been magic. He blinked blearily, and for a terrifying moment his vision didn’t clear.

But then the fading sunset came slowly into focus. The horse broke into a canter, tired but ready, clearly, to be home. They passed through an impressive stretch of farmland, what looked, in dusk's heavy shadows, like potatoes growing in their fields. More fields stretched out much farther on the other side of a modest farmhouse, which had clearly been ransacked, signs of a struggle on every aspect of the building from the broken windows to the door hanging off one hinge to the mess scattered everywhere inside.

The man sighed heavily, Ranboo flinching. But he took out none of his ire on Ranboo, just dragged his torn mattress off the splintered bedframe and draped the bedding over it in the corner.

"Catch some sleep, kid," the man ordered, jerking his thumb at the pile. Ranboo jolted. "You can snag a few hours while I pack, but then we're leaving again. Probably in the middle of the night."

"I, you, I can, help?" Ranboo offered anxiously, the idea of *sleeping* while his new master(?) did work throwing his very bones into discomfort.

"You're obviously exhausted," the man dismissed, "I was gathering my energy during my time in that cell and you spent it in an anxiety attack."

"I can—"

"You'll be more useful if you don't fall off the path in the Nether."

Ranboo clicked his jaw shut and nodded, thoughts of *useless, worthless, cumbersome, burdensome, helpless waste of space* making him curl in on himself as he went where he was directed.

The man left to tend to his horse, and Ranboo quickly snatched his journal from its hiding place, and blinked when he saw what he'd already written there. Had he—had the man allowed him? No, probably not, he must have just snuck a moment, like he was doing now.

*man kind in cell, kind touch, almost executed, stole me
rode horse through nether, man didn't hurt me, arrived at ransacked farmhouse, ordered me to
sleep while he packed
let me vocalize, hasn't hurt me at all yet???*

Ranboo couldn't be sure, of course. But that felt right. Yeah, yeah. That seemed right. Probably. He hid it away, then cautiously laid down on the bedding. Even torn up, it was softer than Ranboo was used to, and the blankets smelled like the man's shirt did, underneath the sharp scent of blood.

Despite himself, Ranboo was asleep before the man had even returned from taking care of his horse.

Chapter End Notes

Comments/constructive criticism always appreciated!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry but you're going to have to deal with Ranboo calling Techno "the man" for three chapters bc social skills are nonexistent in this house rn and this story is Ranboo's POV XD

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When he woke, moonlight scarcely cutting through the deep shadows, he jolted, his heart spiking into overdrive in an instant. The man retracted his hand from Ranboo's shoulder with an "easy there" as Ranboo cowered, covering his head and neck as he tried to make sense of his surroundings.

He—

Okay, okay he remembered the man, sort of. He was—stolen, right, yes, he'd been stolen by the man, who was... nice? Ranboo was pretty sure this man at the very least wasn't terrible to him. He, he was fairly certain that was right? Yeah, yeah probably. It sounded right.

"Sorry," he whispered, getting his arms under him and pushing himself up. He didn't recognize this place. Did that matter? No, wait, yes, he did, the farmhouse. Right right right.

"Don't worry about it," the man grunted. Ranboo looked around, eyes skittering quick, finding the chests all opened and picked over, bags resting near the broken door. Ranboo blinked as his eyes caught on a deeper shadow. Had that trap door always been there? "Time to leave."

Ranboo shot up to his feet, nodding, and helped the man carry the packs out to the stable. The horse looked distinctly less than pleased to have its sleep interrupted. "Go grab the rest," the man ordered, working on the bridle and saddle. Ranboo scurried off, back into the dim lit building, and did as he was told dutifully, until the last bag.

The man hadn't come back inside since he'd started with the horse. Ranboo stood next to the bag, listening to the sounds of the man lifting packs and securing them to the horse. If he was fast, surely he could—probably—just real quick—

He snuck his book out, skimming over the words swiftly as he could in the dim moonlight. Okay, right, right, the punishment room, the execution, the Nether. Right, okay, okay. *Left during night* he penned quickly.

"So it occurred—"

Ranboo couldn't bite down the scream fast enough, wailing like a full-Enderman in pain, jolting away from the doorway like a shot. He hadn't heard him approach at all! And his book was out, his book was *still out*, the man would see it and, and, and—

He curled up on the floor, arms hugging his journal to his chest, tail curled around his legs as he stared up at the man, eyes stinging with unshed tears, trembling and waiting for the worst, for the

inevitable—

“Easy,” the man said with lifted hands, a half-surrender, and Ranboo still flinched. He bowed his head and curled ever so slightly tighter around his book, and screwed his eyes shut.

“Easy,” the man repeated, “uh.” Ranboo trembled, otherwise immobile. “What, what do you have there?”

Ranboo’s shoulders hitched. Please, he didn’t want to forget, he didn’t want to forget. The journal was the only thing that let him exist in any moment other than the present, he didn’t want to be left unmoored and confused like before he’d gotten it. He couldn’t remember the exact way his life had changed once he’d started writing things down, but he remembered that his life *had* changed.

“My, m-memory book,” Ranboo answered quietly, because he’d been asked a direct question and he had to answer.

“Okay?”

For a silent moment, the only movement in the ruined house was dust particles in the moonlight.

“I’m uh, not going to take it from you.”

Ranboo’s head snapped up, blinking hard. The man was still near the door, tall and broad and cast in shadow.

Really?

“I just, wanted to say that we’re heading somewhere cold, so you’re going to need different clothes.” The man gestured to an opened chest. Then he seemed to think better of it, and went to it himself, pulling out a couple different items.

“They’ll be a weird size on you, but we can fix ‘em later.” The man held out the clothes, Ranboo frozen with shock and disbelief.

Really?!

He stared at the cloth, looked up at the man, whose already shadowed eyes were little more than black pits in the skull’s sockets, and then back down at the clothes, gingerly stretching an arm out and taking them.

“So uh, yeah, get dressed. We’ll figure out something more permanent when we get where we’re going.”

Ranboo did not know where they were going. Ranboo did not ask. The man slung the final bag up over his shoulder and left, Ranboo alone with his memory book untouched (unread, why hadn’t the man wanted to read it?) and clean clothes.

Actually, the man had changed out of his bloodstained ones too, and was wearing a cape now. Or at least, Ranboo was pretty sure he hadn’t been wearing a cape before. It was big, fluffy at the collar.

Daringly, far too daring for someone who’d just nearly lost his most prized (and only) possession, Ranboo flipped his journal open again and wrote *he knows about the book, didn’t read it*.

He got dressed quickly, the cloth sturdily woven and thick. It wasn't as soft as it looked, but it was clearly meant for practicality, and nicer than Ranboo was used to. And he got a coat, too, which he hesitantly slipped on.

There were no interior pockets, much less the sort that was large enough for Ranboo's book, so he glanced nervously at the door, stripped off the coat and shirt, and slipped his own back on. It seemed a shame to press the crude cloth against his skin when the other was so much nicer, but he didn't want to have to carry his book in his hands.

Redressed again, Ranboo scurried to the stable where the man was petting down the muzzle of the horse, murmuring quietly. He stopped when Ranboo arrived, staring him down. Sizing him up, finding him lacking. Ranboo was always found lacking.

"You don't need the coat just yet," he stated, "We're going through the Nether first." The man tapped where his own coat was slung over the horse's saddle, and Ranboo nodded and added his alongside it.

Well, not *his* coat. The coat the man had designated for him.

Ranboo followed nervously at the man's heels when he started walking. He wondered briefly why the man didn't ride, except the horse was already pretty heavy-laden, so that made sense. Yeah, that made sense actually.

Ranboo still didn't know the man's name. Right? Right, no, he'd checked his book just before, and if the man had ever told him his name, it had been when Ranboo couldn't write it down. Probably. Had the man ever told him his name? He didn't think he did. Ranboo would just have to hope that he was never expected to address him as anything but "sir," which was what he'd done with people he *did* know the names of, so that would be fine. Yeah, yeah that would be fine.

The magic of the portal didn't feel... *as* bad the third time around. It still left everything woozy and distorted for a moment after stepping out, and the blast of heat didn't help, but Ranboo wasn't going to fall over or anything so hey! Points to him. He kept close to the man, who guided their way, muttering to himself. Something about a roof? And a scarcity of access points. Ranboo didn't know. It wasn't his job to know. Or his place.

There was so much lava.

If Ranboo had thought a couple hours while riding horseback had been bad, this was significantly worse. They spent what must have been a whole day on their feet, taking semi-frequent breaks to sit and drink water, which Ranboo hesitantly declined. The man offered him slices of melon instead, which Ranboo *could* ingest without burning himself, and he gratefully accepted.

Even with the extra food and... honestly unprecedented level of hydration, Ranboo found the journey arduous. It was hot, save sparse greenish-blue biomes where the temperature dropped to something Ranboo might consider "tolerably warm." The horse was cranky, which made Ranboo anxious. Certain death and powerful mobs were every direction Ranboo looked, which made him more anxious. The man was quiet, and broad, and taller than most people, and wore so many iron weapons, and he made Ranboo the most anxious of all.

Except he'd also been uniformly kind to Ranboo, and only spoke to say "watch your step" or warn Ranboo of danger, and kept offering melon slices. And, well, he hadn't hurt Ranboo yet.

Right?

No, yeah, that was right.

Probably.

Ranboo was worked hard as a slave, but at least there was usually *some* variety to his tasks, rather than just walking and climbing and climbing and walking. In the blistering heat. He wasn't sure how the man did it, since he would also take out his pickaxe and build bridges on top of it all, leaving Ranboo to stand and hold Carl.

It seemed sort of dumb that he learned the horse's name before the man's, but if he wanted Ranboo to know his name he would have told him by now. Or if Ranboo had forgotten his name, he wouldn't make him angry by bringing it up.

Finally, *finally*, the man started laying down obsidian blocks. Ranboo held onto Carl's reins and tried to look less-than-dead on his feet.

"Put your coat on," the man ordered, shrugging on his own underneath his furred cloak (and *how* was he wearing that in the Nether?). Ranboo nodded and complied, the added layer positively miserable, but hopefully soon fixed. He followed through the portal, heat and magic dizzying, and then yelped at the *blast* of cold on all his senses.

"Easy," the man hushed. He grabbed Ranboo by the arm, and Ranboo braced, but he only pulled Ranboo away from—oh, the edge of the ice. There was, well, either an ocean or a large lake, behind him. Ranboo wasn't sure which, since, well, he couldn't really see the other side, but also his eyes weren't exactly that good so. Could go either way.

Wait no, the smell. It smelled weird, not like a lake, so, probably the ocean? Yeah, yeah, weird smell probably meant it was the ocean. Cold and salty and strange.

It was already growing dark again.

They really had spent the whole day in the Nether.

The snow crunched under his shoes, untouched save for occasional rabbit tracks, and he shivered as his body was forced to rapidly adjust to an *intense* change in temperature. He yawned, his jaw clicking, and very intentionally did not stumble in the new terrain.

He'd never seen snow before. That he could remember, at least. Maybe he had. Actually he probably had, and he'd just forgotten. But either way. It was kind of nice, pretty.

"Here should be good," the man said just as soon as they were out of sight of the portal. As he flung everything off Carl onto the snow Ranboo glanced around, seeing nothing of note. Trees, a small pool of half-frozen water, a rocky hill that flattened out to where they were standing.

"Sir?" he asked timidly. The man looked at him, but failed to elaborate.

The two stood there, staring at one another, for a long moment. Ranboo's cheeks flushed, ears flattening.

"Did you uh, did you have something to say?"

Ranboo cleared his throat. “Here should be good for what, sir?”

“Oh,” he said softly, “Gotta build a new house. Can you start digging a rectangle, maybe... 10x15 ish? I’ll go get some stone and wood, we can throw down a foundation, some walls, and a stable, then we’ll be done for the night.”

“Yes sir.”

Ranboo was genuinely boggled by his stamina. He took the busted axe he was handed, since the man was using the pickaxe for stone and his own, nicer axe for wood, and set to work.

He felled a nearby tree and built a crude shovel hastily out of the wood. It was far, *far* from elegant, but it’d do the job. It wasn’t like he could just hack at the ground with the axe, after all. He’d dug out the majority of the foundation when it started to gently snow, and he heard the man curse.

“Okay come help with the trees when you’re done!” the man called, and Ranboo answered back with a “Yes sir!”

He was exhausted, but he had worked when exhausted before. He was also cold, and his wrists and ankles went uncovered thanks to his own absurd height in the borrowed clothes. He could be good, though, he wanted to be good. So bad. He would push through it. He wouldn’t give the kind man any reason to stop being kind to him, he could manage that at least, right? Surely at least that.

The dilapidated axe finally broke after only a few trees, and Ranboo felt frustration swell in him.

And fear. Because now he had to say that.

“Sir?”

A grunt.

“The axe broke.”

The man handed over the stone he’d gathered. “Go lay the foundation, I’ll be over in a sec.”

Ranboo nodded and hurried to do just that, clearing the snow that had already fallen into the shallow hole. True to his word, the man arrived not long after, and the walls were crudely hewn but they cut off the wind and snow. Ranboo was tasked with the roof while the man got a fireplace and chimney working, then went out and got the stable built. He hauled in the packs as Ranboo finished, and lit a fire.

“Okay, that should last the night,” he said, probably to himself. “Bed. God, okay.”

The man rubbed up under his mask, probably his eyes. Ranboo wasn’t sure how he was standing at all, right now, actually. Ranboo barely was, and he’d had a nap between... he’d had a nap! The man had, hm.

Ranboo quickly checked his journal.

Yeah, the man had been awake since the punishment room, which was the first time Ranboo had met him, which had been a day and a half ago! And Ranboo doubted he’d slept much before that, either.

It was kind of terrifying actually?

“Sir?”

Another grunt.

“Do you—if there’s anything else that needs done, I can do it while you sleep, sir. I, I rested more recently than you have.”

The man ticked off his fingers quietly, almost under his breath but loud enough for Ranboo to hear. “Carl’s fed and stabled, the stable shares a wall with the fireplace, the chimney works, the wind and snow are kept out, the packs are inside...” he spoke louder, “We just need a bed, kid. Floor’ll leech heat if we sleep on it. Then it’s lights out for both of us.”

“Yessir.”

Ranboo watched the man pull out a crafting table from a pack—actually he pulled out an entire stack of crafting tables, but only placed down the one—and some wool, which he worked into a single, large bed, Ranboo helping as directed. They set it directly in front of the fireplace, Ranboo’s body seemingly sensing how *close* he was to laying down and not moving for a blissful, blissful stretch of unconsciousness. His limbs felt weak, heavy, and the man sat on the mattress and pulled off his boots.

“Take your shoes off and get in. We’ll make you one tomorrow.”

Ranboo hesitated; the same bed..?

“Sir?”

The man grunted.

“In, in the bed with you?”

The man paused a moment, face turned away, and Ranboo’s heart leapt into his throat. He’d done it, he’d finally pushed the man past the last of his patience, stupid idiot slave that asked moronic questions because he was too dumbshit to figure it out on his own—

“‘S cold, you know,” the man said, his voice still low and calm, though stiffer. Ranboo couldn’t help but read the stiffness as Ranboo standing on the man’s last nerve, he should’ve pieced that together on his own. It *was* cold! Very much so! The fire wouldn’t warm the space for a while yet, it made sense to conserve heat, to share it. Ranboo’s master was being smart.

Still, at the edge of the bed, he hesitated. But no, this was what he was supposed to do, *supposed* to do.

Ranboo slipped under the heavy comforter on the side farthest from the fire, conscious of his breathing, of his heart beating in his bird-thin chest. While they both fit, he found himself right on the edge of the mattress but still pressed up against the broad man. He was. Warm. Which, during their journey, Ranboo would’ve hated, because the Nether was so hot. But now they were someplace that was so cold. And the man was still being kind to him.

He should know better than to press his luck...

But he *didn't* want to forget this.

“Sir?”

A tired grunt.

“May I write in my memory book, sir?”

“I do not care.”

Ranboo nodded a little and rolled (well, more like shimmied) over so the firelight landed on the pages.

*man kind in cell, kind touch, almost executed, stole me
rode horse through nether; man didn't hurt me, arrived at ransacked farmhouse, ordered me to
sleep while he packed
let me vocalize, hasn't hurt me at all yet???
left during night
he knows about the book, didn't read it
spent day in Nether, fed melons, built house and stable in snow biome,*

He stared at the page. He felt like there was something else he wanted to write down, something important. Something he should remember.

man still being kind to me, let me sleep in same bed,

There was something, something else, something *important!*

he is warm

Ranboo nodded, just a tiny one, to himself, and stowed away the book again with a self-satisfied “aah.”

He froze. Had he been vocalizing the whole time again? No, surely the man would've brought it up, after so long, right? This was just a fluke. He probably hadn't. Would he have noticed if he was? Ranboo started to tremble. He had been. He wouldn't delude himself, of course he had. He was such a bother, such an incredible annoyance. A truly useless slave, couldn't even follow basic orders, an irritant, a nuisance, only good for causing problems.

“Go to sleep.”

A strong arm draped over him, pulling him away from the brink of his ill begotten thoughts, deeper into warmth. Ranboo twitched at the contact but relaxed into the heat and gentle touch. His body *craved* this kind touch, that didn't hurt and wasn't a cruel prelude to something worse. He rolled back over, pressed in closer and nuzzled his face in against the man's collarbone.

Met with no displeasure, Ranboo timidly stretched his own arm around his waist, the other pinned between their bodies and gripping lightly at his shirt. He bit down on a happy little vwoop and wriggled closer. It was warm here. He was, he was being held. The man shifted, his other arm slipping under Ranboo's laughably lightweight body and he hugged Ranboo.

Ranboo, quite literally, could not remember the last time he'd been hugged. It made something shuddery and aching in his chest go all warbly and tight-hot-limp-shivery. He wiggled closer again,

despite already being basically pressed flush against him, his spindly legs curling around the man's much larger one and his tail twining up and draping over the man's hip.

He smelled nice. Masculine and "heavy" in the way that smells were heavy. His arms were very present against Ranboo's frail body, the weight of them forming swaths of pressure that grounded Ranboo. Made him feel, feel, the opposite of unwanted. Which, he guessed, was wanted, but he wouldn't be *that* presumptuous. He was just a warm body in a cold room, but that was kind of hard to remember when he could feel the puff of the man's breath against the part in his hair, feel the warmth radiating off of him, trapped beneath the blanket, feel the places where their bodies pressed together and *none* of it was painful.

Ranboo closed his eyes and tried to commit this to memory. He tried *so hard* to put this somewhere in his sieve of a brain where it'd stay. He wanted to remember this. He wanted some piece of this moment—warm, held, unharmed—to carry on with him into the future.

He did not remember falling asleep.

Which, sure, he normally didn't, but like, he could usually at least recall a vague *idea* of, yknow, stuff and things. But when he woke up, curled in close to the man's chest with strong arms around him still, he had *no memory at all* of falling asleep.

He did—he did remember the night before, though. Part of it. A really good chunk of it, actually. He smiled to himself, his breath hitching a little. The little memory stuck, it had made it into longterm, and now his brain had a warm little glow in it that Ranboo could brush his mind up against and recall when he needed something kind to cling to. He had very, very few memories he could do that with. He was glad last night could be one of them.

The man was still asleep. Ranboo moving would probably wake him up, and that, that was definitely off the table. No siree bob Ranboo was not doing that. No way. He was going to stay exactly where he was and not move and not even really breathe all that much until the man woke all on his own.

Plus, like, it felt nice. Ranboo's body generally healed pretty fast, especially when he had enough to eat, which he had (he was pretty sure) so he was only the tiniest bit achey. And the bed was warm, and he just knew the world outside the bed would be—definitely not that. And he was starting, just starting, to associate the man's smell with feeling—almost safe. Safeish. Safe-adjacent.

And it really... had just been *so long* since someone had touched Ranboo without hurting him. Who knows since he'd been held. He didn't want it to end. So he let himself doze.

The second time Ranboo woke up, the man was gone. He slipped out of the bed, shivering when his feet hit the cold stone, and sat to quickly get his shoes back on. That finished, he bundled his coat around him and moved towards the door. He shouldn't be sleeping when he could be doing work. He, oh. There was a note.

eat whatever

Hm. Ah. There was also a little arrow drawn towards the packs, which. Hrm. Okay? Okay, Ranboo could, Ranboo could do that.

He dug through the inventory, and, and maybe since the note had said "whatever" it meant it was okay that Ranboo didn't just eat the first thing he saw (which was many, many stacks of raw

potatoes, filling up a whole bag's worth of inventory). There were melon slices, which Ranboo, hm, he was pretty sure he liked those? He checked his notebook.

Maybe because he'd eaten them in the Nether, now he liked them more than he had? That sounded possible. There were apples, too, and golden apples which Ranboo was Never Going To Touch Or Even Really Look At. Nooooo sir, no sir. Those were rare. Important. Golden carrots, too, which, wow.

Hadn't the farmhouse been ransacked? Wouldn't people have stolen these? Ranboo wasn't sure how or why they would've missed them.

Ranboo took an apple and hunk of bread and then, because, because the note had said *whatever*, Ranboo... selfishly took another hunk of bread. It probably made him ungrateful, but he *was* grateful! He felt so much gratitude. And so little hunger. Which he was grateful for.

He pulled out his notebook and jotted down *told me to 'eat whatever'* because it was a funny little observation, and also kind of the man, and Ranboo wanted to remember it.

Outside, Ranboo discovered that the man had fortified the stable (and it looked really nice, actually, significantly nicer than the house currently was) and thrown down bedding. Carl was munching away blithely, ears flicked towards Ranboo but clearly not actually caring all that much. Ranboo did not want to get closer to the animal than he absolutely had to, and so continued his search for his new master.

The nearby woodlands had been pushed back quite a bit, spruce saplings planted all around with the telltale sign of someone who'd been working. Probably a lot of that had happened last night. Ranboo heard the sound of footsteps and oh! There was the man. He was building a second floor, it looked like.

"Sir?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I help?"

"Yeah."

So under his direction, Ranboo set to work on a stove, another bed, a cauldron, another pickaxe, another regular axe, a less-garbage shovel, a hoe, and a large number of chests. As he crafted, the man finished off the second floor, altered the first floor's walls so they were more than just plain wood, rigged the chimney system through a second fireplace, and set up alchemy stands that Ranboo was too daunted to touch.

The man walked Ranboo through, step by step, how to care for Carl. He took greater care with that than anything else he'd asked Ranboo to do, and so Ranboo tried his best to focus. He could tell this was important.

"Do you need to write it down somewhere?"

Ranboo cringed, but nodded. He didn't *seem* angry with Ranboo's faulty memory, with his *need* to have things written down, but a botched job (especially with the man's valued horse) would certainly bring down the man's ire. Ranboo wasn't going to risk it and try and claim he would

remember (which he wouldn't). Ranboo moved to pull out his memory book, but the man was walking past him, back inside.

"Here, use a different book so it's all in one place."

And oh boy! Ranboo's eyes were wide, ears perked and tail twitching, watching the man rummage in a chest. Oh boy *two* books for Ranboo to have!? Sure, one would just be for horse care, but still! Another book! For him! And it would be his (sort of)!

Ranboo took it, thanking him, and tried not to be too obnoxiously delighted over being handed the leatherbound pages. He covered his mouth, but couldn't quite bite down on all his vocalizations.

He was just!! Happy!!! A whole second book, wow! He thumbed over the leather binding, tracing the satisfying texture, and stroked black fingers over pale pages as he flipped it open and stared down the oddly alluring blankness of a new journal. He couldn't remember a time when his own had been new. Pristine. Not yet touched. He startled himself when his wagging tail swung so hard it bapped into a nearby wall.

He jerked his head down, shoulders hunched in mortification, because his master had *seen* that, had snorted when Ranboo jumped.

"C'mon. Let's put that book to use."

Ranboo took diligent notes. That's what he was being given the book *for*, so he needed to be good and use it right, this was a *privilege*, given for a *use*, so he would be good he would be so good.

"Should probably comb out your tail," the man mentioned, and Ranboo stepped on the tufted end self-consciously. He hadn't even been aware it had started wagging again. Well, more like gentle thumping against the ground, but still. Jittery. Annoying.

"Easy." The man placed a (big) hand on Ranboo's shoulder, Ranboo's little fangs digging into his lip, body locked tense and staring vacantly ahead. "Just an observation."

Ranboo nodded, but kept his tail pinned until they left the stable. He wasn't some stupid kid, he should act better. He *would*, because he wanted to give this man only his very best.

Inside, Ranboo helped the man sort his belongings into the chests, which Ranboo was admittedly not very good at. Chest organization was not his strong suit, and he wasn't even sure if that had anything to do with being half-Enderman. He was pretty sure he just sucked.

The day had been another long one. Ranboo was pretty sure this man worked exclusively hard days. They ate and the man taught Ranboo how to alter clothes. Ranboo hadn't (that he remembered) been part of any taskforce that did mending, and there were a lot more components than Ranboo had assumed at first glance.

"Sir?"

"You can just ask questions, you don't have to say 'sir?' every time."

"Sorry."

The man shrugged.

“Um, can I write this down in the horse book?”

“I do not care.”

Ranboo’s lips pressed thin, but he nodded. He took notes about sewing a page after the horse stuff, to keep it organized.

The clothes fit him perfectly, after they were finished, and the man had even sewn an inventory into them, a luxury not generally afforded to slaves. Ranboo settled his precious books into the slots and ran his hands up and down the sturdy fabric, tail twitching childishly and making happy vocalizations. He was on the other side of the room from the man, and kept his volume low, and his master hadn’t stopped Ranboo so far. So maybe it was okay if he just kept doing it?

Ranboo shot to his feet when the man approached. He waved Ranboo off, but Ranboo wasn’t sure what that *meant* here. Though kind, Ranboo’s new master had not given him much in terms of expected behavior.

“So, I’ve got a friend who ran into trouble right before they came for me,” he stated as he began fiddling with the brewing stands again, “I gotta head out in the morning and go get him.”

Ranboo nodded, pulling out his memory book and writing *man leaves to retrieve friend*

“Take care of Carl while I’m gone, yeah?”

take care of horse

“Other than that, just try not to let any creepers in the house. I should only be gone for a few days, a week tops.” The man set the finished potions into a nearby chest, and started in on new ones.

“After that, uh, there’s a village not too far from here. Found it this morning. If you want, after I’m back and can look after Carl on my own, I could drop you off there. See if you can’t live a normal life.”

Ranboo couldn’t move.

Ranboo couldn’t breathe.

No, no, no no no no no no no, please, no, not, he, he *had* been bad after all, then, hadn’t he? Just because the man hadn’t scolded him didn’t mean Ranboo could get away with, with, eating and vocalizing and wagging and being a worthless nuisance Ranboo should have known better *Ranboo should have known better* he should have known this was too good to be true, that kindness this grand would have an expiration date looming overhead, he’d been *hopeful* of all things and Ranboo thought he was past the stupid urge to have hope and now he was going to be—not even sold, *discarded*. Left for whoever would find Ranboo and pick him up first. He was going to be abandoned, thrown away like so much trash, left out in this awful cold and if no one else wanted him he would die in it and—

“...eathe, breathe kid, c’mon try to breathe for me.”

Ranboo reached up with shaking hands and clung to the man’s arms. He was distantly aware that he wasn’t really standing, more that he was being held up. He was also distantly aware that the man was *so close*. And that he wanted Ranboo to breathe.

Ranboo tried.

He tried so hard. He always tried so hard, but he always failed and failed and *failed!*

“I—” he choked, gasping frantically.

“Don’t talk,” the man ordered gently, “Just try to breathe right now, yeah?”

“Sorr—” Ranboo tried again, because he was sorry, he was *sorry*, he needed to say that, needed to beg for forgiveness, he *had* to!

“Follow my breathing,” the man ordered, and took loud, deliberate, heavy breaths. Ranboo tried, his breathing sharp and short and nowhere near what was being demanded of him. He couldn’t, he *couldn’t* and this failure was just going to be added to the list of his shortcomings, all the reasons why nobody would bother to keep a stupid, useless, pathetic little half mob like him.

Ranboo’s head spun, light headed from no air and new motion, as the man slowly set him down on the wooden floor. His ears were ringing, his vision going all weird, and he only caught every other word the man said to him. Something about his back?

He moved away and Ranboo keened, distorted and inhuman. Now came the pain. Now it came. Ranboo had disobeyed a direct order and was being a panicky mess, and there wasn’t a punishment room to lock him in here, leave him in the dark and silence until his own shallow breathing knocked him out and he was forced to calm down. So the whip, then.

“Bite this.”

The man held something to Ranboo’s mouth and he obeyed on instinct, expecting maybe a gag or —

Horrible flavor burst across Ranboo’s tongue and he yelped, scrambling back, mouth hanging open and saliva dripping off his pointed teeth as the juice from—*what* had he just bitten?

His system seemed to go into momentary shock, pulled from his panic by sheer and utter bewilderment (and distaste, god, that was *awful*).

He blinked and focused in on the man’s hand, which held—a lemon. He’d bitten into a lemon. He licked his lips and swallowed hard, breathing labored but no longer frantic. A lemon. Yeah, yeah, okay, now that his brain was catching up, yeah, it tasted like lemon. Sour and acidic.

To call Ranboo baffled would be an understatement.

“Can you breathe deep for me?” the man asked, and Ranboo took a slower, shuddering breath. He nodded and wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Okay, keep doing that.”

Ranboo nodded again, breathing as slowly as he could. He blinked as the lemon was settled into his own palm, a pointy, deep bite mark scoring the skin. He guessed he should bite it again, if he started spiraling.

“Th-thank—sorry, sorry, I’m sorry,” Ranboo murmured, flinching when a heavy hand settled in his hair.

But the man just ruffled it, and the warm touch was, nice. Still kind. Still, somehow, impossibly, *still* kind.

“It was just an offer,” the man said when Ranboo had, maybe halfway, settled down. “You can turn it down. I don’t mind.”

“You’re, you’re not throwing me out?” Ranboo asked, bewilderment resurging, because even after *all of that*—?

“Nah, kid, just wanted to let you know you have options. You don’t gotta stick around longer than you want. Except for feeding Carl, I do need you to hang around that long.”

Ranboo nodded.

“I don’t—I don’t, um, I want—” he felt the full body shudder, and with the man’s hand in his hair he was sure he felt it too, his body’s rejection of the idea that he was ever allowed to *want* anything, “—to stick around?” Was that right? Was that the right way to say it?

The man shrugged. “Okay.”

And that was that.

Even after he’d soothed his racing heart and stopped the panicked breathing, Ranboo felt *exhausted*. Like he’d run a mile for every minute he spent being a stupid cowardly mess. The man shooed him off to bed, saying he’d be right after once the potions were done, and Ranboo gratefully obeyed.

panicked, lemon bite, still being kind to me, not kicking me out(?)

Maybe while the man was gone Ranboo would read over his memories and condense them. Honestly, he might just... erase most of what happened with his old master, except for the important things. He wouldn’t need to remember any of it now, right? Except what if they came for the man again, like they had with the ruined farmhouse, and Ranboo was sent *back*?

The fear that flooded him at that idea threatened to trigger another panic, but he was either too tired, or not fearful enough, so he just shook his head and shook his head and kept shaking his head until he was dizzy and his ears went all bloodrushed and the repetitive motion soothed him down from that self inflicted scare. They’d travelled a day through the Nether. Nobody knew where they were (least of all Ranboo, and he was physically present). And the man was strong, a good fighter, he wouldn’t lose a second time.

He slipped his book back into his inventory and stayed awake exactly long enough for the man to descend the ladder and climb into his own bed, firelight casting his silhouette in shadow. Ranboo stared at the shape of him, large and blocking out the flames. He wanted—it wasn’t his place to *want* anything but he wanted. He wanted to. He.

The bed he was in had a soft woolen blanket, it was warm, it was more comfortable than what he usually slept in. Last night had been a one-off thing. The product of exhaustion and not having the time or effort to make Ranboo a sleeping place of his own. Now he had one. He should sleep.

He’d gone longer stretches of time without contact than this. It was actually pretty unprecedented, that he was touched at all, except to correct him. He shouldn’t expect it or wish for it to be a regular

thing. He shouldn't stare longingly at the lip of his master's mattress and ponder how he was just thin enough that he could probably lie there without falling off. He shouldn't entertain thoughts of slipping out from under his own covers and begging to be let back under the man's. He wasn't a *child* curling up in his parents' bed after a nightmare, he was a slave and he was trying to be a good one.

He rolled over and pulled his pillow in against his chest, hugging it tightly with his knees and tail curled in around it.

When the man was gone in the morning, Ranboo was not surprised.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who left a comment on this fic! They really do just make my day <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Ranboo is left to his own devices

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was a little odd that Ranboo hadn't woken up when his master left, but he accepted that the man moved swiftly and silently, and that Ranboo was allowed to sleep in, here.

The *eat whatever* note remained where it had been, untouched and unmoved by either of them. So. Ranboo ate whatever.

It still felt wrong. Just to. Take. But Ranboo wasn't exactly going to eat the lemon all by itself, so bread it was.

He, uhh. What should he do?

He checked his memory book, and right! Right! Carl. He took out his second book (and having an inventory was so convenient, actually) and refreshed all the steps for horse care. Right, he had all day. He could do this.

He fed Carl, mucked the stable, groomed the intimidating horse, laid down fresh bedding, and made himself scarce. Something told him that, despite all odds, the horse was going to get sick of Ranboo before its master did. And normally Ranboo was pretty okay with animals!

He hoped the stray cat he used to feed found someone else to love her.

Which, huh, weird that there was literally anything he missed about his last life, but there it was. He flipped open his notebook, not all the way to the end, but in the middle pages. The earlier pages.

fed Carnation fish guts. she rolled on her back and let me touch her belly

Ranboo smiled at the memory, recalling the murky mental image of a skinny little calico cat who meowed in a way Ranboo could describe only as ladylike. He brushed his fingers over the text, then replaced his journal into his inventory.

He should do something. What should he do? Uhh, what was there to do? He should do chores. Except, he'd just finished the only chore the man had left for him? Hrm. Hrmmm.

The house had literally just been built, so it wasn't like there was a lot of cleaning that needed done. All their food was currently coming from the man's chests, so Ranboo didn't have a garden or field to tend to. Carl was the only animal.

Maybe Ranboo could change that. He could, he could till the soil and see if anything would grow. Maybe find a cow, or even a pair of cows and start breeding them? That would count as useful, right?

The man had mentioned a village nearby. Ranboo could also go see if he could find that, while the sun was still up. And then later, by firelight, he could possibly condense his memory book. He jotted all of his suggestions down, and decided that finding the village would take top priority. As long as he was back in time to take care of Carl's evening routine, Ranboo had time to waste!

Which was such a rebellious thought, oh god, here he was *wasting* time.

But he didn't exactly have anything better to do.

The sun was out, too, which was pleasant. It made the cold a little less biting, and combined with Ranboo's correctly-fitting clothes and the nice coat, he actually didn't really mind the snowy biome all that much! He went out towards where the man had clearly been chopping trees, and saw a plume of smoke off a little ways. Okay, easy!

It would be good to see who their sort-of-neighbors were. And also. In case the man *did* get sick of Ranboo, and change his mind, who Ranboo's would-be owners were.

But no, he would be good, he would be good and he wouldn't give the man any reason to get rid of him. Any more reasons. Than the ones Ranboo had given already. He would be good, though! He could, he could be good!

There was a farmer, a butcher, and some people Ranboo didn't immediately know the profession of wandering about. He stayed off the edge of the town's border. Talking to people sounded like a pretty terrible idea, all things considered. He wasn't exactly good at it, and didn't really feel up to giving himself a panic attack today, and they'd probably be furious with him if he even tried. A half-Enderman slave without his master wouldn't—

Actually.

Where was Ranboo's collar?

He felt his neck, but, it was totally absent. When had it been removed?? He hadn't written it down, he'd *just* checked his book, but he wasn't wearing it, so. So.

That meant something. What did that mean? When was the last time he'd had it on? Had he worn it in the Nether? He was pretty sure. While building the house? Maybe? He didn't remember, he couldn't remember, why hadn't he written it down?! Had he taken it off *himself*? What if his master came back and he still hadn't found it? Had his master taken it off? That had to be it, right? Ranboo would never take it off on his own. Right? He wasn't *that* stupid, but now it was gone and Ranboo was just wandering around uncollared with no sign of who owned him or even that he was owned at all!

"You alright?"

Ranboo's eyes snapped up to meet the villager's. The butcher, actually, her face screwed up in concern. Oh no.

“Um.” She thought he was a free person. “Yeah, uh.” She had no idea he wasn’t. “Just, forgot something important at home. I—I think.” He was wearing nice clothes. No collar. She had no way of knowing. “Uh, you’re the butcher for this town?” He was *terrible*, ohhhh he deserved to be whipped for this.

“Mm,” she hummed, “You need something?”

“Uh, breedable animals, but, I’m mostly just, like, getting to know the area?” He didn’t have anything tradeable. Well, the bitten lemon was still in his inventory, but that wouldn’t get him a chicken egg, much less actual livestock. He was wasting her time. He was *talking to a free person* and *letting her think he was free too*. Ohhhh he was bad he was so bad he was so very very bad.

But the woman did not know, or care. She led Ranboo through the quiet village, Ranboo feeling the eyes of every single person they passed on him, scrutinizing him, a half-mob with dirty hair and a tattered tail and *no collar* following obediently along. The butcher talked to him for a little bit, pointing out her neighbors and what trades they might give Ranboo, introducing him to the town golem (which sent a primal, primitive *fear* down Ranboo’s spine), and showing him where she set up shop and what her going prices were. Ranboo did not have emeralds, but he jotted down her prices anyway. Good to at least pretend he was attentive and had something worthwhile to do here, instead of just wasting her time.

Finally, an opportunity arose for Ranboo to stutter out a goodbye and slip back into the trees. As soon as he was sure he was out of sight, he ran.

He collapsed onto his knees in the snow, clutching at his arms in a futile attempt to hug himself, breathing hard and eyes going fuzzed out and unfocused. He’d talked to a free person. He’d *talked* to a *free person*! Like he mattered! Like he was a potential customer! Admittedly, he probably would’ve had to get to that point eventually, if he wanted to buy a cow, but for some reason he hadn’t really conceptualized that properly and now he’d *spoken* with her and he’d been seen by all of them *all of them* and they knew he existed they had judged him on sight and he *wasn’t wearing his collar* when they eventually found out he was a slave they would all be furious with him! Because he couldn’t keep this secret forever!

Right?

Well.

Once his master was back, he would do all of the trading and managing of his household. Ranboo would go back to just being a normal, nothing-worthy slave. He’d do what his master told him—and his last master hadn’t ever ordered him to leave his estate, right? So Ranboo would just stay at the house and his master would speak with the villagers and he would never see them again, after this.

Yeah, this was just a fluke. A once in a lifetime thing for Ranboo. It was okay if they didn’t know he was a slave, because they would never find out and get mad at him. He’d just disappear off their radar, as quickly and abruptly as he’d placed himself on it.

He stood, taking slower breaths, and nodded to himself. Yeah. Yeah this would be fine. This would be good. Yeah.

Yeah, he would be fine. Probably. He pulled out his memory book and wrote about what had happened in the village, wanting to remember that (and probably needing to, if he wanted to go

back for a cow sometime in the week his master was gone)(was it a week? Ranboo was *pretty* sure he'd said a week. Right?).

And. The sun was still up.

He added *go mining?* to his list of chore ideas.

The village was close by, was the thing, so he hadn't exactly spent the day on it. What to do? Something soothing, something to calm himself. Ranboo tilled a little patch of dirt near the house and cut eyes off one of the man's potatoes, since he seemed to like those best? Once planted, Ranboo wondered if maybe he should start growing some wheat, too, since they would need bread and Carl would need hay.

Something to think about, something to think about.

Actually, something to do, actually something to do. Ranboo didn't have any other chores and it wasn't quite time to take care of Carl again yet.

Ranboo ate after he planted a few rows of wheat, feeling like he had *probably* earned it. Then took care of the horse. Then stoked the fire and curled up in front of it, memory book in hand.

He... didn't *want* to erase anything, just yet. If he didn't, he'd hit the end of his book soon, unless he found a way to make more paper and could add leaves to the back of it.

Well actually.

make paper

Okay, okay! Okay, yeah, that would, that would probably be fine.

And Ranboo hadn't exactly had a labor-intensive day. In fact, he'd had a pretty easy one! Probably the easiest day of his life, barring the part where he *pretended to be a free person* while *talking to a free person*, but he hadn't gotten caught, or hurt. So really, he had no reason to want to turn in early.

But the bed was there, and sort-of his, and the fire was crackling happily in the fireplace, and Carl was tended to and Ranboo was well fed and...

He summarized his day in his journal, took his shoes off, and crawled in under the blanket. He hugged the pillow, curling around it at first, and then, with a little giggle to himself, stretched luxuriously over the comfortable mattress.

Then he flopped down, his arms up over his head and legs starfishing out, and snorted. Then hummed, and started vocalizing, little happy vwwoops and hrms and he even popped his lips for a little while. No one to hear him, no one to be bothered by his stupid noises. He grinned and curled in around his pillow again, burying his smile in the pillow case, and gave a louder vwoop. Then a *loud* vwoop, louder than he'd ever dared, and crouched in around the pillow reflexively. Then he giggled.

He was alone. No one would hear him even if he screamed.

He frowned. When his master came back, he and his friend would be able to do anything they wanted to Ranboo, and no one would hear or care.

He shook his head. They would be able to do anything they wanted to him anyway. That was kind of the point of having a slave, wasn't it? He shouldn't bother with these thoughts; his situation wasn't changed. He would be good and obedient and work to please them and if they wanted him to scream, he'd scream.

And if they wanted him to feed and groom a horse and sleep in a bed and "eat whatever," then he'd do that too, and he'd show them he could be grateful. However they wanted. Any method of gratitude they desired, he would give.

He shut his eyes slowly, and nudged his face further in against the pillow in his arms. His tail thwapped against the mattress, and he wondered if he should maybe try and clean himself up tomorrow. It was a *long*, arduous process, given that water burned him, but he had time, and his master had commented on how ratty and disgusting his tail was.

He took his book out and quickly penned that in, too. Then he rolled over, carrying the pillow with him, and nuzzled his face into it again. It smelled nice. He inhaled deeply, in slow through his nose and slower out his mouth.

He felt *good*.

He vwooped again, and hummed to himself, and rubbed his nose back and forth against the fabric. He wasn't exhausted, so he didn't exactly conk out, but he did drift off pleasantly for the first time in memory.

After Carl was once again groomed, Ranboo decided to go ahead and take a crack at that for himself. Water and heat functioned very similarly for him. Too much would burn. But in small amounts it was only uncomfortable. A fire would scorch Ranboo as well as a bucket of water would, but a damp washcloth didn't feel much worse than holding his hand over a candle's flame. He could handle it, just not for too long in one spot.

He gathered some snow in a cloth and spread it out thinly, then left it in front of the fire to melt. The moisture sank into the cloth, sinister and ominous, but the heat of the fire slowly leeched the wetness until it was only damp. Once it looked touchable, Ranboo set a hesitant hand on top of it.

Sensation rose like skin too close to a flame, but it didn't burn. Alright. He stripped out of his coat and shirt and went for his back first, the scarred skin already less sensitive thanks to—well. Then his chest and arms; caked dust scrubbed off and left his skin tingling with a mix of the dampness and abrasion. Finding a still-mostly-clean patch on the cloth, Ranboo scrubbed at his face, teeth digging into his lip. He rubbed at the pale scars underneath his eyes, where previous tears had made him regret his weakness, and sighed as he set the cloth down.

He would have to find some way to clean it without injuring himself too badly, before his master came back. He put his shirt and coat back on, extracted another piece of cloth, and went out to collect more snow.

His skin itched where he had cleaned it. Ranboo pointedly did not scratch.

He checked through the windows, but Ranboo was entirely alone, out here. Isolated, as close to a free man as he'd ever been in all his life. There was no one. Even so, he felt nervous, taking off his pants and sitting just, just right there in the middle of the floor. He scrubbed his lower body and the skin of his tail quickly, then redressed the moment he was able. He flexed his toes as he cleaned his

feet, counting freckles along the backs and thinking to himself that he should probably find a way to clip his nails without being gross or using tools not meant for him.

He padded about barefoot, searching through his master's inventory, and found clippers amongst the man's personal effects. Would he mind if Ranboo used them?

...Either way, he wouldn't know.

Once his shoes were back on, Ranboo went out far from the house to get rid of the clippings, past where his master might happen upon them. Not that Ranboo thought he was being bad! Because, he wasn't, probably. But *if* he was, it was such a little thing, if his master didn't know it couldn't hurt, right?

God he was so ungrateful. He set the clippers back into the *exact* place he'd found them as he berated himself. He was going behind his master's back. He was bad. This was bad of him. He was using tools without permission and *deliberately* hiding the evidence.

He gathered more snow, and watched it melt.

There was a comb in his master's chest. He'd mentioned, hadn't he, that Ranboo should clean up his tail, right? While Ranboo was learning about Carl. Right??? He was pretty sure that was right. Ish. Something like it? Something had been said that made Ranboo *pretty* sure the man wanted him to make his tail look like less of a disgusting eyesore.

So that *probably* meant he was allowed to use a comb?

If not, if, if Ranboo *did* get caught and *did* get in trouble. This master had been lenient. So far. Ranboo could beg forgiveness, and probably mitigate whatever punishment would come for him.

Begging was annoying, but this master didn't seem all that easily annoyed.

Ranboo took the cloth and comb and pinned his tail beneath his ankle, and set to work clearing the clumps of dirt and grime and tangled, tattered mess out. By the end he had a small pile of fur sitting next to his hip, and a tail that looked... better than he'd ever remembered seeing it.

He gave a little celebratory vwoop as he passed the comb through and it came out with no resistance each time. He ran his fingers through the fluff, enjoying the clean feel of it. It was softer than he remembered. Not to say it was soft, that was, it was still pretty, uh. *Not*. Pretty, that was, not-pretty. But it was his, and it was prettier than it had been.

...He should probably clean his hair.

By the time he could pass the comb through those strands without resistance, it was *well* past noon. Ranboo's leg bounced, disturbing the now-much-larger-pile of discarded tail fluff and combed hair. He'd pulled out whole clumps of the stuff, and he wasn't sure if something had gone wrong and he was actually actively losing hair or if he'd just. Really gone that long without brushing, and the fallen strands had just been hanging out on his head for Nether knew how long.

He took out an apple (a *normal* one, hhg, even just looking at the golden apples while he took a red one made him anxious) and munched quietly on it. Then he... took out another apple. And some melon slices.

It seemed silly that his appetite was so strong despite the fact that he hadn't done anything all day. But.

He scurried down the ladder (his palms aching on each rung) to check and yup, yeah, the *eat whatever* note was still there. He tapped two fingers down on top of it, confirming its existence, and maybe sort of just... touching it to touch it. He glanced at the beds in front of the fireplace, and neatened his. No reason to be sloppy, even if no one was there to see it.

The fire was burning low. He should go put more wood into it. And probably the fire upstairs, too. And the firewood his master had prepped before leaving was out.

Should he use wood from the inventory? He could go out and get another tree for firewood purposes, that was doable. The man had left an iron axe—but hadn't he taken it with him?—and the chore beckoned Ranboo with the veneer of productivity.

Oh, there was an extra pickaxe in here too! Ranboo could probably mine a little. See if he couldn't find anything useful. The chore beckoned Ranboo with the veneer of productivity.

Once outside, he saw the wheat and potatoes he'd planted the day before, and oh yeah, he should probably check in on that and make sure it had enough water. Did he have a bucket? If he was careful he could water the plants without scalding himself, and he wasn't in any rush, so he could take his time.

He went back inside and looked through the chests, and noticed, oh yeah! The fires were starting to burn low! That's why he had the axe! Okay, right after the water, he'd do that.

After watering the crops, Ranboo took the pickaxe out of his inventory and went off to mine a little. The pickaxe hurt his palms where he gripped it, but he'd had *way* worse, so he ignored it. He actually managed to dig a fairly decently sized hole, finding a few small veins of coal and four whole emeralds, which! Wow! He considered that pretty lucky, all things considered. That felt lucky, anyway.

But he knew that he had *one* job and that was taking care of the horse, so even though he wasn't really particularly tired, he quit and headed back to the house.

Carl... Ranboo was pretty sure he didn't, like, *like* him? But Carl at the very least seemed resigned to the idea of Ranboo in his space until their owner returned from—hm. What was his master off doing?

It didn't matter, probably. Ranboo knew he was gone, and that he was coming back. Eventually. He pulled out his memory book.

Oh yeah! His master had a friend he needed to go get. That was right, that was right. He'd be back in a couple days.

When Ranboo went inside, sun close to the horizon, the fires were completely out, the house chilled.

“Ah.”

He went out to the area the man had been logging in. Okay, okay *focus*. He had a task, this was important. He felled a tree and meant to start chopping it into inventory-sized hunks, but he should

replant the saplings first before it got too dark to see where they should go. He tried to space them evenly, like the ones his master had planted, mimicking that. Surveying his work, he placed his hands on his hips and smiled. The saplings looked good! Kinda hard to see with the sun gone and all, but he was sure that come morning they'd look just as nice.

The sound of a creaking bow was his only warning before an arrow shot past him, slicing a line open on his cheek.

He shrieked, more Enderman than person (not that he technically counted as a person in the first place) and whirled. A skeleton advanced on him, already drawing the bowstring back. He lurched, running, and yelped when he caught sight of a zombie. Why were these here!? They couldn't go where it was—

It wasn't light.

Ranboo hadn't set up any torches, any lanterns, any street lamps, *anything* around, and his master hadn't bothered before he left. Ranboo had always been inside when the sun set (or that once, in the storm, when the weather had kept the mobs at bay).

He was so *stupid*!

His shoes skidded in the snow, redirecting himself again. The zombie grunted when the skeleton's arrow hit it instead, and Ranboo booked it for the house.

A spark and a fizz and Ranboo ran *faster*.

It didn't blow up (thank everything, thank goodness), but the creeper gave Ranboo enough adrenaline to bolt through the door and slam it shut behind him. Out of sight. Out of reach.

The fires were out. Ranboo blinked, and remembered that that's what he'd gone outside for in the first place. He sighed, full body and loud, with no one there to hear him.

He rifled through his master's belongings and used the wood already gathered. He'd. He'd just. Replace it tomorrow.

Once the fires were relit and the house was warming back up, he took out his memory book and noted to himself that he needed to replace the wood he was using for burning.

Hm.

Ranboo traced his fingers over his own self-imposed tasks. Mine, grow plants, gather livestock, clean himself, make paper, collect wood.

It felt *weird* to make his own chore list. A little exhilarating, Ranboo wasn't going to lie, to have that much power over himself. *Temporary* power! But definitely weird.

His skin itched, that night, as he tried to fall asleep, and his palms hurt. He hadn't exhausted himself enough to ignore it. He wondered, briefly, if the man owned lotion, but then scolded himself for even *thinking* of using such a thing. That was a *luxury*. Just because his skin felt dry and itchy and bad didn't mean he was allowed to start acting above himself. It was a *privilege* that he was awake enough to not immediately conk out, regardless of pain or discomfort. He should be grateful for this.

He wished his master was here. He wished they hadn't built the second bed.

Fuck, he was such an ungrateful wretch. He had a *bed* and he had the *audacity* to wish he could just sleep held soft and warm—could *impose* on his *master* and linger in his space when he was gone, what was he thinking what was *wrong* with him!?

He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes and tried to think of something other than his itching skin, other than his aching palms, other than his errant thoughts, something that would let him sleep and not be a bad slave.

He pulled out his memory book and read over everything that had happened since that first encounter. He traced the words, his scribbled notes, his observations, the summaries of his days. It was so much. He used the word “kind” *so much*. But that was right. His master *was* kind.

The empty house was a small liberation from the judging eyes of those who might find fault in him, but the tradeoff was that it was... empty.

Lonely.

Ranboo buried further underneath the covers and clutched his pillow to his chest, lips pressed to the hem and knees curling up around it. His tail tuft tickled softly at his nose, and he twitched it just-so to the side so it didn't further irritate his sensitive skin.

At some point, sometime, he managed to fall asleep. His skin felt better in the morning. His palms still ached but they would for a while, he knew, scrubbing at his skin with a damp washcloth for that long would naturally have consequences, but it was worth it to be clean.

He took good care of Carl. He hefted the pickaxe, found the hole he'd started the day before (it only took a *little* aimless wandering before he found it!), and started mining again. He should get iron, replace the pickaxe he was wearing away at the durability of. Maybe make himself some armor, if he had, like, a reasonable amount and could theoretically waste some of it on protecting himself from the mobs.

Oh! Those were emeralds! That was really lucky!

Ranboo actually really liked mining. The monotony of it was soothing. Sure, he had to keep aware just in case he ran into anything unsavory, but for the most part he was... sort of allowed to check out. He was also entirely alone in his little hole, so he let himself vocalize as much as he wanted. He'd keep it under wraps once his master came back, but for now there was no one to hear him.

Oh! Hey, emeralds! That was really lucky!

He actually did end up making himself some armor. It wasn't the best fitting, but he wasn't an armorer, and it'd keep a stray arrow or zombie bite from taking him out. He also kind of liked how it clattered when he moved, and whirled his arms around in big circles just to hear the metal shift. But then he shook his head and got back to work. He shouldn't slack off.

Oh neat! Emeralds! That was really lucky!

Wait.

He checked his inventory. Hmm. That was. More gemstones than a slave should reasonably have. Did he find all of those? He must have, right? He hadn't left his hole since that morning, right?

Actually wait how long had he been down there?

...He'd head back up in just a second. He wasn't overly tired. Just kinda hungry. Thirsty, but he was always thirsty. No one wanted to waste actual *drinks* on a slave and water was kind of out of the question. He should get a cow. He checked his memory book. Yeah, cows were on the list of things he wanted to try and acquire. He could milk it and he would just have all that milk for himself to drink, until his master came home, and even after there was only *so* much milk the man could possibly need in a day, right?

Right. Ranboo should get a cow. A source of drinkable fluid that he could put in his body.

What train of thought got him on this?

Oh right, right, he wasn't exactly tired enough yet to want to climb all the way back up. He'd just go a little longer. Just a little bit longer, then he'd head back up and make sure he was still doing things within a reasonable time frame and Carl wasn't mad at him for missing dinner time.

... Those.

Those were. Uh. Hmmmm. Those uh, those were. Diamonds?

Ranboo struck his pickaxe against the stone and pried them away.

Yeah.

Uh.

Those were diamonds.

Huh!

Ranboo glanced around, but he was, obviously, the only one there. Besides, it wasn't like someone could physically phase through the earth and set diamonds in his path, like, that wasn't physically possible.

He'd just... found diamonds??????

He would gift them to his master, when he returned. A thank you for his kindness and lenience. A payment of what was owed; Ranboo owned nothing for himself. Ranboo placed them in his inventory and then decided that you know what? He *was* done mining for the day. That was enough mining for him.

He hadn't lost too much time down in the ground, though, which was a relief. The passage of time was a... flimsy thing for him. He didn't always have the best grip on it. He went inside and oh! The fires were burning low. He should—

UGH wait right, right, he'd felled a tree last night for this *exact* purpose, he remembered that now! Okay, okay, *f o c u s* Ranboo, get the wood. Chop the wood into firewood, and bring it inside. Focus. He could do this. He had—okay he had to go back inside and get the axe because he hadn't brought it with him—actually, he should probably make another axe, too, since he was using this as

well, and he had the iron for it. Okay, yeah, good idea, he went to the crafting table and made another that he proudly looked over.

Not too bad if he said so himself! He placed the unused one in his master's inventory, where he'd gotten the first one from, and oh right right right! He'd meant to put the emeralds and diamonds away in here. He jotted that down in his memory book, so he could remember which ones he'd mined and could therefore, theoretically, use.

Oh! A little higher on the page, right, he was supposed to get firewood! That's what the axe was for! Right right right, okay, *focus*.

Axe in hand, determination thrumming through his body, Ranboo went outside and found the tree he'd felled the night before. Okay. Okay? Okay! He chopped it up, adding the pieces to his inventory as he went, and smiled victoriously. He did it! He didn't get distracted this time! He went inside and set the wood in the fireplace, and then nigh-immediately started to cough because oh yeah. That tree had been in the snow overnight. It was moist. Wet wood smoked *bad* when it was lit. Even with the chimney, the cabin quickly got a smokey smell to it. Should, should Ranboo prop open a door to air it out? There was still daylight, so it wasn't like any mobs would get in. But the cold would, and didn't that sort of defeat the purpose of a fire in the first place?

The smoke made him thirsty, too, thirstier, so rather than make any sort of decision about the door Ranboo instead pulled melon slices out of a chest and curled up in the corner furthest from the fire, nibbling on the fruit.

He should space this out more. The melons were beginning to run low, and they were Ranboo's current primary source for hydration. He took out his memory book and took note of that.

Then he checked over his other book, because he could, and he wanted to make sure he wasn't missing anything, and also because it was *his* and he had *two* books. His tail thumped lightly against the stone floor of the lower level, one book resting in his lap and the other held in his hands.

He had very detailed sewing instructions.

He checked his memory book, but saw no notes about a chore that needed done that needed sewing. The only relevant note was that Ranboo had his own clothes now, which, yes, he was wearing them, he *did* know that!

They were very nice clothes. He ran his fingers over the sturdy cloth, enjoying the feeling.

Hmm.

He should build a little pen for theoretical cows to live in. There was still daylight to burn, he didn't need to take care of Carl just yet. He needed wood for that though, which, okay. Okay focus. He wasn't sure what it was about logging that made it so hard for him to just *do the task* but he was gonna, okay, he was going to! He had the axe. The trees were *right there*. He was focused.

An hour and a half later, he took his first swing at the wood. Okay. He was focusing. He was doing the thing.

Wait what did he need the wood for again?

Right right right right right, fence, cows, pen, right, okay, he *had this*. He sat at the crafting table for a while, constructing fence after fence, and then set up a modest pen not too far from the house. Far enough that the mooing would, at best, be background noise. Like the wind blowing! Not loud-loud enough to be a nuisance.

Ranboo could manage that role all on his own, haha. Ha...

He took care of Carl, ate his dinner, and read over his memories before adding to the list.

I hope master comes home soon he wrote, then squinted at what he'd written.

Really? He examined himself, and found the words weren't a lie. He'd now spent more time alone in this house than he had with the man in total (he was pretty sure), but the times his master *had* been present had been... really nice. Nerve-wracking in the same way all interactions with people were nerve-wracking, but Ranboo was *lonely*. He didn't have anything other than Carl to keep him company, and the nearby village—

Wait, wait wait wait wait, he'd taken note of prices. A cow... he checked the chest he'd put the emeralds in.

It was just enough. That was so *incredibly* lucky.

buy cow he wrote for his agenda tomorrow. Then he giggled. Really? Already? He'd done it? Sure, he'd spent the better portion of the day mining, but *really*? A whole cow!? It felt serendipitous. He was almost too excited to fall asleep. But the next morning did come, and so he gathered up the emeralds he'd mined, leaving the diamonds untouched (not for him, those were for master), and set out to find the village again.

Actually, wait, where was the village?

It was... there had been an ocean... and a village... probably, this way?

...the village was not that way.

No wait! Right! The village was in the same-ish-direction that all the saplings were! Right right right, right, right, Ranboo was stupid, of course that was the way.

He paused at the edge of the town again, working himself up. He didn't have a collar (bad, bad slave, bad), he was wearing nice clothes, no one here knew he was a slave. He was here to make a purchase. He let out a slow breath, pursing his lips and hollowing his cheeks. He could make a purchase. He had the money. He knew how it went, sort of. He could make a pretty solid guess at how it went. He just needed to step... into the town... pick up a foot and put it in front of the other... any second now.

Aaaaany second now.

God he was so stupid okay okay just *go*!

Hnng.

Almost mechanically, Ranboo forced one foot up, and set it down, and the momentum was just enough to keep him going.

Where was he going?

He remembered the butcher had set up shop somewhere... somewhere. He was *not* going to stop any single person that he saw and ask them. No, no no, nooooo no no. No asking for directions. Before that: death. He'd find it on his own.

Probably.

Wait there it was! Ranboo's ears twitched upward and he focused in on that. Yeah, yeah this was the right place. Yeah. Okay. Oh and there she was! Cold flooded his veins in the same moment heat swelled in him, making him shivery and flushed all at once. Oh no, no no no no no no he couldn't do this he didn't know how he'd managed the first time but he was a *slave* he wasn't meant to be here he wasn't *able* he was stupid and worthless and would never survive on his own doing these kinds of things he *needed* a master to do it for him he was wrong he was so wrong he needed to leave now before she saw him looking at her before she—

"Hey there!" she greeted.

"Hello, uhm." Ranboo bit his lip. He hid his shaking hands in his pockets. The fact that he would trouble her if he collapsed was the only thing that kept his knees from giving out beneath him. "Are you, uh, still selling a cow?"

"Got a couple of 'em, yeah. Price hasn't changed."

Ranboo nodded. Okay, good, that was good, if the price had changed that would have been very bad actually. He set the emeralds on her table with a deliberate slowness, hands tense as iron to keep from visibly trembling, and she inspected them with passing scrutiny. A jeweler, she was not.

She showed him a small herd: a bull, two steers, a heifer, and a number of cows. Ranboo decided, as the butcher showed him a mild mannered dairy cow, that that was the one. Something about her big eyes and slow movements made her seem friendly. Or at the very least, non-threatening. Like even *he* could approach her with a bucket and face no resentment or resistance. He pet gently at her muzzle; he was going to name her Ranmoo and he was going to take very very very good care of her.

"I'm not surprised, she's a good one," the butcher said when Ranboo timidly informed her of his decision.

"Ah." He cleared his throat, flushing with nervous embarrassment. People could *hear him now*, time to stop making strange noises. "Thank you very much."

"And you, for your business. Have a good day now."

'Ha-have a good day.'

Thankfully, she left first, wandering back to her home and shop, and Ranboo glanced down at his purchase, who was already back to grazing at the scrub around their feet.

He led her back to the pen he'd built with little more than a rope, but she was amicable and offered no protest. He pat over her, enjoying the coarse texture of her fur (hair? What was cowhide even, like, called?) against his fingers. Hm. He should bring her some feed and build a roofed area. It

wasn't snowing now, but it would likely do so eventually, and he didn't want Ms. Ranmoo out in bad weather unprotected.

That meant getting more wood. Okay. Okay. *Okay!!!* He could DO THIS he could get the wood he would just go inside, grab the axe, go back outside, fell a tree, and turn it into a stable he could he would he was going to he was focusing he was *focused* he—wait actually he needed to write that he'd bought a cow and named her Ranmoo—okay *now* he was focusing he was climbing the stairs to the second floor he was going inside he was—

The first thing that hit him was the stench of blood.

The second was the fact that the man inside the house was *not* his master.

Chapter End Notes

Yes I know butchers aren't ranchers but Minecraft doesn't HAVE ranchers so she's a dual class

Comments are always appreciated, feel free to scream at me *blows you kisses and runs away from the cliffhanger I have left you with*

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The stranger was *drenched* in blood, more red than any other color splashed over his clothes and skin and *giant* black wings. The silvery eyespots on the feathers sported red streaks and Ranboo was paralyzed by their false gaze as the man turned at the sound of the opening door, mild curiosity on his features.

“Oh,” he said with a smile, one that might have looked disarming and approachable had the stranger not been *covered in blood*, “you’re that half-Ender kid Techno was telling me about.”

“Uh.”

Ranboo was not at his most eloquent when he was frozen to the spot. God he might have peed himself a little. He wanted to run.

“I’m Philza Minecraft,” the stranger—Philza—said, raising a hand and making Ranboo flinch. But he just scratched behind his ear. “Techno mentioned he hadn’t quite caught your name?”

Uh. “Uh.” Ranboo swallowed, eyes going to the floor. “Ranboo.”

“Nice to meet you, Ranboo.” The man’s bright words were a sharp contrast against the pervasive gut feeling that Ranboo was about to die. There was something *wrong* about Philza. Something deeply unsettling about him that rattled Ranboo down to his bones, and it was more than *just* the blood. Worse even than the village’s golem. He couldn’t even really describe it, just, there was a charged aura about the man that was *off* and spoke to Ranboo of profound danger.

But Philza had said hello, and was waiting on a response. Ranboo’s fingers clenched in the fabric of his coat.

“It’s nice to meet you sir,” he said timidly, not feeling like this was very nice at all.

Philza stepped forward and Ranboo flinched, every nerve in his body screaming run run *run* but he knew better, he knew better, he stayed put and waited for whatever was about to happen to him—

“Easy Ranboo,” Philza said, low with a pleasant accent to his words. Ranboo did not, in fact, take it easy.

The eyespots on the wings were *looking* at him.

Philza’s normal eyes were looking at him too. “There’s nothing to be scared of, yeah? I’m not gonna hurt you mate.” Philza glanced down at himself. “Ah, thouuuugh I can see how you’d think I might. Techno and I ran rough of some pillagers on the way here. Kind of fortunate, if you think about it, but we didn’t exactly get the chance to clean up before gettin’ here. I promise you’re safe, though.”

Ranboo pressed his lips together and gave a small nodnodnod, still curled in on himself and staring at the floor, shoulders hunched to his chin.

“Um, sir?” he whispered, barely audible really.

“Yeah mate?”

“Techno—is that, the nice man?”

Philza barked out a laugh, making Ranboo jump.

“I’m telling him you called him that,” he said with a bright grin, shoulders shaking with his mirth. Ranboo felt blood drain from his face and his hands shake. Was that bad? Was that wrong?? He hadn’t meant to overstep!

“Hey, hey, woah now, take a deep breath,” Philza prompted, hands held placatingly out in front of him, “Nothing’s wrong, I’m sorry I said it like that, didn’t mean to freak you out.”

Right, yes, Ranboo shouldn’t panic, panicking was annoying, it got him in trouble just as much—more—as his mistakes did, he shouldn’t be a bother he should get himself under control why was he such a *problem* he—

Philza clicked his tongue and let out a string of shhh shshshshhhh, like he was soothing a crying child or an injured animal. Which, Ranboo was sort of the center of that venn diagram huh? “Can I touch you?”

Ranboo nodded. He had no right to tell him no.

A warm palm cupped Ranboo’s cheek and he gasped softly, body curling down into the touch with a shaking *need*. Gentle touch, kind touch, Philza was murmuring at him, light nothings that passed his lips without consequence or meaning. Another hand rubbed up and down Ranboo’s arm, his nerves feeling oversensitive and too alert.

In theory, he could claim it was intentional, when his legs gave out from under him and he knelt at Philza’s feet. It wasn’t, but if asked he could probably pass it off like he’d meant to.

“Well hey there,” Philza said, a little louder, and pressed his fingers into Ranboo’s hair and started skritchng. Ranboo keened, pressing into it, eyes closed and body listing. “You good?”

Ranboo was pretty sure that was a rhetorical question. Yeah, pretty sure. Telling his master’s friend—second master?—that he *wasn’t* good was a no-no, but he also didn’t think he was allowed to call himself presumptuous things like “good,” even in agreement.

The door downstairs opened, Ranboo’s ears twitching at the sound.

“Okay well Carl’s fine so he’s probably not—”

“He’s up here, Technoblade,” Philza called softly, Ranboo swaying away from the ladder that connected the floors as his master—Techno or Technoblade?—came into sight. Ranboo couldn’t help but feel a wave of shaky relief, even though his master’s presence added new importance to the interaction and he, too, was absolutely soaked through in blood, half dried and crusting over.

“There you are,” he huffed, looking at Ranboo who continued to kneel, Philza’s hand in his hair.

“Sorry?” Ranboo could be sorry, if Technoblade wanted. Ranboo could be *so* sorry, for so many things.

Technoblade grunted with a shrug. Philza laughed, a bright and airy sound, and smoothed some of Ranboo's hair from his face.

"He was worried about where you'd run off to," Philza said, removing his hand (and Ranboo, needy and annoying, chasing after it before he remembered not to do that).

"I was *checking* on Carl."

"Checking for evidence that you'd been about," Philza informed Ranboo, sotto voce, with a little wink.

Technoblade huffed and began rummaging through a chest. "Where'd I put the iron..." he muttered to himself, back staunchly turned to them.

"Um, downstairs sir." Ranboo didn't remember which chest, exactly, but he knew it was downstairs. Probably. Wait, what if it wasn't? What if he'd just given his master bad information, first thing after he'd gotten back? Ranboo covered his mouth, eyes on the floor, curling in on himself. Stupid. When would he learn to keep his *fucking* mouth shut?

"Crafting a laundry machine," Technoblade said as he slid down the ladder. He called up through the floor, "Phil, don't go smearing blood all over my stuff!"

"You don't have any stuff!" Philza called back with another laugh, gesturing at the unfurnished second floor. A chest with tools, a chest with brewing materials, the brewing stands themselves, the fireplace, and one of the crafting tables were the only items in sight.

Philza ruffled his wings a little, the blood that hadn't dried yet flecking onto the floor in the center of the room and a couple dots on one wall. Ranboo winced—he had no illusions of who would be cleaning that, and his hands still hurt from when he'd bathed. "I'm gonna craft a couch specifically to stain it," he shouted as an afterthought, mischief in his voice.

"Do not!"

"I'm doing it."

Though *terrifying*, Ranboo found he actually really liked Philza's laugh.

Ranboo watched as Philza did, in fact, sit himself before the crafting table and start in on what looked like the wooden framework either another bed, or a couch. So, couch, yeah, because Philza had *said* that. Right. Ranboo... scooted himself back into a corner, making himself small and unassuming. Quiet. Not vocalizing, not making weird movements, not asking stupid questions. His tail curled in around his ankles and he tucked the tufted end into his lap, running his fingers anxiously through the fluff as he actively kept himself *quiet* and *still* and *not annoying*.

He meant to keep his eyes lowered deferentially, but he kept peeking up to watch Philza work, sounds of metal and the sand-gunpowder crackle-shift of redstone floating up between the floorboards all the while. His own unproductive hands were a personal failing on his part, but aside from that he could *almost* convince this was normal. Just people going about their work, conducting their business.

Actually, this probably *was* normal, for the two of them. Ranboo was the odd one out, the sore thumb, the unnecessary addition.

He wished they would order him to help them with something. But the crafting table only comfortably seated one, and Ranboo was useless with redstone. Worse than useless, he'd probably fuck it up. He knew that. So slothful waste it was! And all the while, *all* the while, the eyespots on Philza's wings *stared* at Ranboo. They were just pointed white ovals, he knew that, he was smart enough to know that. They weren't actually eyes, just eye-shaped. Philza couldn't see out of them. Nobody was looking at him. But they *looked* like eyes, giant and haunting, and they pinned Ranboo to his place with shaking agitation as he twisted his tail fluff around his fingers almost hard enough to sting.

He...

He glanced again at Philza, who was working the wood and not paying attention to Ranboo, aside from his giant eyespots that Ranboo *knew* weren't even *real* so he shouldn't be a stupid baby about it. So. He.

He took out his memory book.

master's name is Technoblade, his friend is Philza, they fought pillagers and got bloody, Philza is nice(?) and scary, pet my hair and told me he wouldn't hurt me

"You use your journal for note taking, yeah?" Philza asked, jolting Ranboo out of his focus. He shoved his book back inside his inventory, cowering somehow even closer in on himself. Philza wasn't looking at him, was still cutting wood into lengths and carving strategic holes into the bars. How had—the eyespots?—but no, no, he probably had just heard Ranboo's quill scratching against the page.

Ranboo swallowed hard, his breath coming out funny, but he'd been asked a direct question. "Y-yessir."

"Nice, sounds like a helpful tool."

"It is, sir," Ranboo offered hesitantly. Was Philza trying to have a conversation? With him? He couldn't imagine why. Ranboo wasn't much of an entertainer. Or much of anything, really. Or, wait, did Philza want to read his book? Probably. That was all people ever wanted to do, when they took an interest in his notebook. He bit his lip. He hated sharing, hated the humiliating burn of letting other people know just how worthless his brain was, hated the judgement that came with someone else knowing what Ranboo thought of his environment and those around him. He gripped the skin of his tail with both hands, the sting of his palms grounding him. Preparing him.

"Phil, come put your clothes in!"

"Oi, you have *not* set up the redstone that fast!" Philza shouted with another one of his little laughs. Ranboo got the impression that he did that a lot. He stayed curled up in the corner as Philza went downstairs, passing Ranboo by without so much as a glance or second thought, then observed the now-emptied space.

He'd—not? Why, why had he brought up the memory book, then? Just to let Ranboo know he knew? Was this a threat? A warning of some sorts? What did Philza *want*?! Ranboo was stupid, he couldn't—he wasn't smart enough to figure it out on his own. He needed it said plainly. But no, he shouldn't expect that, he knew how the world worked, and it didn't cater to cheese grate brains like Ranboo's.

Technoblade said something quiet, words indistinguishable from where Ranboo sat, and he heard Philza murmur something in return.

What were they discussing? Him? The redstone? The pillagers they'd fought? Ranboo's extensive list of failings? Whether or not Ranboo was even worth the trouble?

He shook his head.

If they wanted him to know, they would tell him. He took out his journal again.

they're playful with one another

Which made sense, ultimately. Ranboo knew they were friends, and friends would sometimes nip and elbow at each other.

He... *almost* found it sort of soothing. There was a casual air that existed between the two that his last master wouldn't be caught dead sharing with anyone.

Yeah, sure, the fact that they were playfully *antagonistic* towards one another put Ranboo on all kinds of edges, because what if that ire turned genuine? And of course they were friends, so they wouldn't hurt one another, but Ranboo was present and available and the *only* other creature around to take it out on—but no, no, his master was kind.

He thumbed through his memory book. Kind kind kind kind. And Philza had been nice. Touched him gently and made a promise of safety that Ranboo appreciated, even though he knew the words were hollow. (Even though his primitive hindbrain felt Philza's presence like talons around his throat).

He'd find the end of their patience someday, and when they inevitably hurt him he'd deserve it.

But right then, the two of them were talking in hushed murmurs downstairs and Ranboo was uninjured in a warm house. And it *was* nice, listening to other people talking. Even if he couldn't make out the words, their voices made pleasant sounds, and he'd just been so *lonely* without anyone else around. He released his tail and resumed toying with the tuft at the end.

He wondered if his master would notice, that he'd combed it out. His master had been the one to say that he should, right? Maybe... no, no, that was right, yeah? Yeah, that was right.

Quietly, while he was all to himself, he let out a couple little "mmm"s and a single, accidental vwoop. He tensed, glancing at the ladder. But they hadn't heard him.

He... kind of wanted to go down and see what they were doing. Help, maybe? He could offer help. He *wanted* to help. Wanted to not sit all alone with no idea of what he *should* be doing (and his master was back, which meant there was obviously something he *should* be doing). And yes Technoblade was very big and strong and powerful and yes Philza was very scary, but the idea of *not* offering to help and *continuing* to just sit there, alone, unknowing, was potentially even worse. So he should go down the ladder and try to help. Yeah, yeah, that was what he would do.

He got up and nervously approached the ladder, stomach wound so tight it couldn't even churn, but when he'd put his foot on the first rung he saw his master come into view below. He launched himself back, arms pinwheeling, and only narrowly avoided falling on his ass. Was his breathing supposed to sound like that?

Technoblade came into view wearing bloodless clothes. He'd also wiped off his mask, it looked like? Probably.

He stared at Ranboo.

Ranboo stared at him. Er, well, his shoulder.

Ranboo was trembling, hands curled in close to his chest, ears pinned down.

Technoblade cleared his throat.

“So uh. You’ve been eating while I was out?”

Ranboo nodded. That had to be the right answer, right? He'd *left* the *eat whatever* note, so, that *had* to be right, right?

“Good, good. That’s good.”

Ranboo’s ears and tail perked, eyes lifting to his master’s chin, and he felt the tufted end twitch-twitch involuntarily.

There was another moment of silence, a little happy trail of sparks skittering over Ranboo’s livewire nerves at the fact that he’d been called good by the ultimate authority in his life.

“So you were out and about this morning,” Technoblade stated, sounding like he was prompting Ranboo for further information. Ranboo could never *quite* be certain, verbal cues were kind of tricky for him, especially since he knew that he should be quiet and not speak unless spoken to. Except, well, in this situation, he’d been spoken to, so.

“I uh, got a cow.”

“Oh, that’s useful,” Technoblade said, sounding mildly surprised. But in a pleasant way. Praising him? Could Ranboo count that as praise? His tail swished behind him, back and forth just once, the tip flicking.

“I can—be useful, sir.”

Technoblade waved him off, pulling wool from his inventory with his other hand. “Naaah, nah, don’t worry about that.” He sat at the crafting table and picked up Philza’s work, inspecting it only momentarily before settling the cutouts into their corresponding slots, Ranboo edging hesitantly closer.

Ranboo wondered if he should be searching for something to say. Technoblade didn’t seem to be expecting a response to his last (strange) statement, but Ranboo. He wanted to. Say *something*. He should offer to help, right? He should try to speak to the man who owned him. Stay on his good side so he would continue letting him *eat whatever* and sleep in a bed and not get hurt every time he did something stupid.

And, maybe, maybe if he was very good and well behaved, maybe Technoblade would, with his kind hands, maybe—

“If you’re going to come over here, come over,” he said, making Ranboo jolt. Ranboo rushed the remaining distance, kneeling down at Technoblade’s side with tense shoulders, teeth worrying his

lip. He stared with wide eyes at the wooden flooring, body taut as a wire, waiting for Technoblade's next move.

Technoblade didn't hurt him, but he didn't touch him either. He also didn't really try to continue the stilted conversation. The two were silent, actually, Ranboo holding very still while Technoblade worked on the couch. Quiet sounds of tinkering came up from the ground floor. The smell of sawdust tickled Ranboo's nose.

Time passed and the two men worked, Ranboo idle and immobile as marble.

Technoblade finished with the couch before Philza was done tinkering with the redstone, and when he stood Ranboo shot to his feet, ready to either help or get out of the way as his owner desired.

"Here, help me move this over in front of those windows," Technoblade ordered, and Ranboo nodded immediately. It was blissful relief to finally have an order, a task. He could obey those, usually. He could do *this*, even *Ranboo* could do this.

He winced when the couch dug into his sensitive palms, but he lifted its weight and he moved it where he was told and he didn't drop it or anything. He glanced up at Technoblade after, wondering if he'd done a good job (and that was *stupid*, he was just moving a couch, it wasn't anything praiseworthy *or* notable, he needed to stop being so clingy needy obnoxious), but found that he was frowning faintly at him.

Ranboo tensed. What had he done wrong?! He cowered as his master approached, curling his hands in near his chest and ears pinned down flat.

"Are you hurt?"

Ranboo swallowed nervously, staring vacantly at his master's (large, strong) hand. "Yessir," he whispered, "but—but I can—it doesn't really affect me much I can still—"

"Your hands?"

Ranboo offered them out, palms up, with hunched shoulders and a nod. He had planned on having more time to recover before his master came back. He hadn't thought he'd be so obvious about it. He'd had *worse* why was he being such a brat about a little soreness?

Technoblade cupped his hands beneath Ranboo's own and Ranboo bit his lip. He brushed a thumb—too light to really hurt, but Ranboo twitched anyway (bad slave, bad)—overtop the sensitive skin. "What happened?"

"I, uh, cleaned myself, sir? With—with a damp cloth." And had he remembered to clean those? He hadn't, had he? They were still where he left them, dirtied and out of place. That was another strike against him. "Um, water burns me."

Technoblade sucked in air through his teeth. "Right."

They stood there a moment, Ranboo's hands cradled gently, Technoblade moving a thumb in soothing little back-and-forth motions over one of his knuckles, and Ranboo wasn't sure if he was supposed to take comfort in the gentle touch or be worried about what his master's heavy silence meant for him. He ended up doing both, which, no, he wasn't sure how his brain managed to pull that off either.

“Wait here,” he ordered, then slid down the ladder to the main floor once again.

Which meant, of course, that Ranboo was left, alone once again, with all his thoughts. *Perfect* time to catastrophize. By the time the sounds of opening chests and rummaging had stopped and his master was once again climbing the ladder, Ranboo had worked himself into a shaking mess contemplating what Technoblade could be looking for. What he was going to do to Ranboo. And why? That didn’t matter; Ranboo was rarely gifted an explanation.

Figure it out, dumbshit.

He couldn’t stop himself in time from flinching a step back, his foot altogether too loud on the wood floor, his breathing too loud, his heartbeat too loud, his master’s heavy steps resounding in the space that was too large and practically echoing and—

“Here,” he said, pulling a tapering cactus out of his inventory and splitting it down the middle with a knife. He settled at the crafting table again, absently brushing away the wood shavings and carving out the inside... goo? It wasn’t like, liquid, but it looked slimy and less-than solid. Ranboo wasn’t sure what that meant. He had no idea what was happening, actually.

Technoblade crushed the contents into a sorta-liquid-paste-ish and beckoned Ranboo over. Ranboo went, and allowed himself to be moved when Technoblade gripped him gently by the wrist and pulled his hand out.

“This should help,” Technoblade said, rubbing the goo into Ranboo’s smarting palms with gentle fingers. Ranboo bit his lip to hide his wince, the sensation... strange. Cold-hot. Like burning, but cool. It, it wasn’t *painful*, no, but it was... strange, yeah, strange, it was just very odd. He hadn’t experienced anything like it before. Sort of like the lotion? He assumed this was like lotion, only different.

But where were his manners?

“Thank you sir.”

Technoblade grunted, a gruff noise for all that his fingers were soft and careful with Ranboo’s skin. He repeated the process on Ranboo’s other palm, the gentle motions as soothing as the almost-lotion was.

Beneath them, redstone machinery clunked to life and the sound of rushing *water* made Ranboo jump, yanking his hand out of Technoblade’s hold.

“I’m sorry!” he gasped immediately when he realized what he did. “I’m sorry sir, I’m very sorry!” Ranboo held his hand back out for his master to retake, but Technoblade just waved him off.

“Nah, nah, I was done anyway.”

Ranboo pressed his lips together and nodded anxiously, curling his hands in near his chest protectively with downturned ears. His stomach felt all floppy and wobbly, disappointment and guilt twisting his insides.

“Y’know, eventually you’re going to learn how to work redstone on your own,” Philza said as he climbed the ladder. He was freshly dressed as well, the clothes too big on him and clearly

belonging to Technoblade. His wings were trapped beneath the shirt, but those eye spots weren't even partially covered. Oh boy!

"But why would I do that when I can just pretend to know what I'm doing and then ask you to 'finish' it for me?"

Philza laughed, utterly unbothered, and pushed his sleeves up to mid arm. When they immediately fell back down over his hands, he blew at one of his bangs and set to rolling them, awkwardly twisting his hand out of the one before settling on the cloth.

"Here," Technoblade offered, and Ranboo watched him roll up the sleeves for his friend. His eyes flicked back and forth between the two.

They were powerful men; that much was, even without the bloodstains, exceedingly obvious. Technoblade had ripped the whipping post out of the ground. Philza emanated a casual, understated lethality that set Ranboo's hairs on end. So it was almost strange, to see them laughing and fussing with sleeves and complaining about redstone. They seemed like the kind of men who would, somehow, be *above* normal, petty things like that. Like they would be an exception to the mundane and quiet aspects of life.

Ranboo reached for his memory book, but then realized he wasn't even sure what he wanted to take note of. He couldn't quite... what was it, that he was attempting to parse, here? He wasn't sure he could summarize this observation.

Technoblade rolls up Philza's sleeves he wrote instead, hoping that the memory of the action would grant him access to these weird musings, and he could figure it out later.

"So Ranboo got a cow," Technoblade mentioned, Ranboo snapping to attention.

"Oh that's useful!" Philza said brightly, flicking his wrists and checking that the sleeves would stay. "We should see if we can't get another and breed them."

"I've got emeralds. Idiots that caught me didn't even check for potential hides. Neeerds."

Ranboo hesitantly stepped back as they approached him, but no hands reached out to grab or yank or slap. Philza gestured towards the door. "Show us the cow?"

Oh! Yes, of course that was what they would want! "Y-yessir!" Ranboo fumbled with the door latch anxiously, nerves making the utterly trivial task somehow difficult. *Clumsy*. He got it open and darted out, Technoblade following after at a casual pace and Philza along behind him, wearing a coat that was also too-large for him and trailed in the snow.

"Oh I see the pen," Technoblade remarked, his heavy footsteps crunching the snow and making Ranboo's ears twitch with every step. Okay okay okay he didn't sound displeased he didn't seem angry with the decisions Ranboo had made when left to his own devices. Okay. Okay, so, Ranboo was fine, then. Yeah, that meant Ranboo was fine. Probably.

"She's a, uh, dairy cow? So I can—that is, I can't, uh, water burns me? So, I can't drink it. So, uh, ahh." Ranboo clamped a hand over his mouth. His master was home, it was time to *stop vocalizing*.

"So milk then. Makes sense," Philza said with his default cheer, hopping over the fence and approaching Ranmoo with a click of his tongue. "You name her yet?"

“Uhm,” Ranboo hesitated, realizing now that he would have to say the name out loud, and how stupid it sounded, in hindsight. “I, uh, have been calling her Ranmoo in my head. B-but, you can, she doesn’t have to—”

“It’s fine,” Technoblade interrupted, and Ranboo shut his mouth with a click.

“That’s kinda cute,” Philza added, petting at her muzzle and looking over her eyes. “Named after you ‘n shit.”

Ranboo gave a little nod, ears perking timidly upwards. “Cute” was not really a word that was used for him. Uh. Ever.

Ranmoo let out a loud moo, bumping her head into Philza’s chest, and he laughed and gave her a series of firm pats along the neck. Ranboo smiled.

These were good men. Kind men. They treated Ranboo and the other animals well. Oh but thinking of, Technoblade had been checking on Carl. And he hadn’t said anything, so that meant Ranboo had taken care of him properly, right? Yeah, yeah Ranboo was pretty sure he’d done it right. That his efforts had been met with Technoblade’s approval. He could only hope. Probably, he probably would have said something if Ranboo hadn’t done it right.

“You got a little farm started?” Philza prompted, glancing over at the rows Ranboo had planted.

“Oh, yes, uh, potatoes and wheat.”

Philza laughed, a barking, sudden sound, and Ranboo felt his tail fluff out. He, he hadn’t thought that was funny?

“He’s already got your number mate!” Philza said with a happy little giggle, Technoblade letting a rush of air out through his nose.

“Look, spuds are just an objectively good vegetable okay?” Technoblade tested the sturdiness of the fence, and nodded once to himself. “More importantly, we should probably get some sorta barn or at least a roof for her to shelter under during storms.”

Oh! Right! That’s what Ranboo had been going inside to do! Oh, and feed, he was going to feed her, but, now that Technoblade was back, maybe he would be the one making the decisions? Ranboo liked working with animals, he’d be all too happy to take these chores as his own. But that wasn’t up to him. But maybe if he offered?

“Um,” he started, but froze when both of them looked straight at him. She didn’t—she was grazing, this wasn’t even necessary yet and—really, he’d just be wasting their time if—

“You can speak, you don’t gotta get permission first,” Technoblade reminded, and Ranboo ducked his head and nodded.

“Um, I can, animal upkeep, sirs, I’m pretty good at it, a-and, would be happy to.” Did he even make sense? Why did he open up his mouth, he knew better than to open up his mouth, why didn’t he ever *think* before letting words come out of his shit idiot brain?

“Well the cow is yours so that’s probably an expectation at this point,” Technoblade mused aloud, “But we’ll help you build the roof, since we’re here. Carl’s real specific, I dunno if he’ll let you

near him anymore now that he knows I'm around and could be doing it instead."

"And takin' care of Carl makes you happy," Philza added.

"Takin' care of Carl makes one specific, very loud voice happy; *I* am a paragon of indifference."

Philza snorted and laughed again, but Ranboo's brows were drawn together. Voice..?

He shook his head. If they wanted him to know, they'd tell him.

"Sure you are, mate."

"When has doubting me gotten you anywhere."

"I never said I was doubting you."

"A *paragon* of indifference, Phil."

Another laugh. "Anyway, we could probably put up a cute little build along the edge, right up against the rock wall," Philza changed the subject, "You got any wood lying around?"

"Uhhh yup, we should have wood. Might wanna get a few extra trees just in case."

Ranboo was set down at a crafting table making fences and roofing, Philza commandeering the construction itself, while Technoblade took his axe to gather more wood. Ranboo couldn't help but feel extremely relieved about the role they'd chosen for him. If he'd been asked to construct anything under their *scrutiny* he probably would've panicked. It's one thing to build a roof when it was just him and Ranmoo, another entirely to be *watched* and *judged* while doing it. And, well, he knew his track record with staying on task during logging. Crafting suited him just fine, readying parts that Philza asked for and able to glance up and admire the build every now and then.

The finished product was more like a cross between a pen and a shack, just enough space for Ranmoo to be comfortable and partially-exposed to the elements, but the rock face would shelter her from the worst of the weather and the gates opened to the small paddock she could wander about and graze in. Ranboo was practically vibrating, happy, less nervous than he had been, but also *wanting* to go lay down some bedding and fetch some hay for her.

"Alright idle questions," Technoblade said when he came back out from the house, having put away the excess supplies. Ranboo flinched, his good mood on ice. Oh no. "One. Did I make a third axe and just forget about it?"

"Oh, um, no. I, was mining and, I found a couple veins of iron, and, I didn't want to lower the durability on your tools, so, I, uh, made one for myself?"

"Okay, good to know. Two—and it's okay if you *did*, I just wanna know—did you do something with diamonds?"

Ranboo felt fear flow through him. Oh no. Oh no what if he *did*? "Uh." Those were important, valuable, he couldn't just, but what if he had, but, "Um." He took out his memory book and skimmed over it with shaky palms and unsteady vision.

"It's just that I saw a couple split away from the rest of the group, and my chest organization isn't great but it's not *that* bad."

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck Ranboo had fucked up he didn't know what he'd done but he'd fucked up he'd fucked up—

Oh!

“Oh, uh, I, found a couple? When I was mining. And, that was weird, so, I stopped mining. But! But, they're yours, sir, I, probably should've just put them with the rest of your belongings I'm sorry I—”

“Nahhh nah nah nah, if you mined them, they're yours.”

“O-oh, um, but, I'm,” Ranboo kind of wanted to hurl. Or maybe just go prostrate at Technoblade's feet and cry, “I'm, giving them to you?”

“I had diamonds in my vault, I'm good on diamonds. Don't sweat it.”

Ranboo was very much indeed going to sweat it.

“Phil, axe for you.”

“Oh pogchamp,” Philza remarked idly, catching the *bladed weapon out of the air* when it was tossed to him. His wings flexed, seemingly without conscious effort, and the eyespots that had been hidden beneath the coat flared briefly into sight. Ranboo made a small, high noise at that. Ohhhh these men were dangerous these men were so dangerous he did not like *that!* No sir no sir he did not enjoy seeing that happen.

But noisy, annoying slaves got paid attention to, and both men (axes they were holding axes) were looking at him. Ranboo took a hesitant step backwards (even though *he knew better*) and whimpered out a “Sorry.”

“It's alright,” Technoblade said the same moment Philza asked, “You alright?”

Ranboo ducked his head and gripped his arms. *Two* people staring at him was too many people. He didn't—he didn't know what to—he—

Technoblade's knuckles brushed softly against Ranboo's cheek, and Ranboo's firebright nerves all jumped but he leaned into the touch. Technoblade flipped his hand to cup Ranboo's face, then slid his fingers through his hair and gently pulled Ranboo in so his face was pressed against Technoblade's furred neckline. Technoblade's hand came to a rest against Ranboo's spine, holding him loosely, and Ranboo bit his tongue to keep from whining like an injured bird.

Nothing bad had even happened to him. He really shouldn't be acting like this.

“...The axe wasn't gonna hurt anyone,” Technoblade said, voice terse but hand still soft. He rubbed his thumb up against the protruding bone of Ranboo's shoulderblade, small, reassuring movements. “Phil and I are skilled.”

Philza's hand came up to pat Ranboo on the shoulder. “What he means to say is it's alright, mate. No reason to be scared.”

Right. Right, they weren't real eyespots. The axe wasn't a danger to people like them. Ranboo was being a whiny little bitch for *no reason*. He should grow the fuck up already and stop acting like a child.

What he did instead was press his face further into the furred cape, meeting the solid wall that was Technoblade's immovability. The arm around his back circled further, so he was being *held* again (and it was so nice to be held), and Ranboo... slumped.

"Ope, there he goes," Philza said, but he sounded encouraging. And Ranboo was just. His nerves were frayed with the tension he'd been carrying since he first walked through the door and he was a little too shot to resume worrying while he was tucked in against Technoblade's side. He'd overthink what Philza had to say and what Technoblade wanted and what Ranboo was *supposed* to do in a minute. Just, just a minute. He didn't want to leave the soft-dark-quiet feeling of being held and hidden just yet.

Technoblade shifted and Ranboo squeezed his eyes only tighter, knowing that movement meant it was *over* and he didn't want it to be over yet (he didn't get wants he wasn't allowed to *want*). But instead of pushing Ranboo off, Technoblade ran his hand up to squeeze gently at the base of Ranboo's neck. It didn't even feel threatening, just firm and warm.

"You alright kid?"

And Ranboo nodded, because that was the only acceptable answer. And because it was, just a little bit, true. His strung nerves didn't feel... *quite* so taut, he'd had a breather, a moment to compose himself.

He felt Technoblade's nose nudge up against his hair, an electric jolt down his spine that made his breath stutter, and then he was gently pushed off. He went obediently, an aching little knot willing him back into warmth and touch that his brain *knew* he couldn't indulge, and he toed nervously at the snow. What now?

Technoblade ruffled Ranboo's hair, startling him just a little, and then changed the subject like Ranboo hadn't just had another (minor!) breakdown all over him.

"Why don't you finish up with Ranmoo? Phil, I had an idea for a third floor and wanted your opinion?"

"Sure," Philza said easily, "You're alright if we leave you alone for a bit?"

Ranboo nodded, actually pretty eager for the idea. He uh, although he was definitely feeling more solid, a chance to *breathe*-breathe would absolutely be appreciated. Philza shrugged like it made no ultimate difference to him, and the two men returned to the house.

Ranboo watched them leave for only a moment, before the wind tossed their cape and coat and Ranboo remembered that Philza's eye spots were at their most visible on his back.

Ranboo shivered and turned around. He hopped the fence and placed his jittery palms on Ranmoo, who's ear flicked back at him but continued chomping on the scrub.

Ranboo sighed heavily once the men were inside the house, grateful for the reprieve. He was happy his master was home, he really was, and he was happy his master's friend was here as well, he was! He was, but also. Being perceived by free people was exhausting. It was nice to just focus on straw and hay and the way Ranmoo chewed her cud.

Once his legs felt a little less like gelatin he gathered feed and bedding for her and brought them to her pen. She kept an ear on him, but it wasn't to judge him or anything. It wasn't like being looked

at by *people*, and to be fair, he was keeping an ear on her too. He went up to her when he was done, shoes crunching in the thin layer of snow (thinner here, where the rock wall blocked its falling), and pet fondly at her side.

Curiously, Ranboo leaned his weight against her. Naturally, an animal her size didn't even sway. He glanced at the house. This counted as wasting time, indulging himself and screwing around when there was work to be done. But also. Technoblade and Philza were working on the house, the mark of their efforts starkly sticking up from what had already been built. They weren't paying attention to him.

He climbed up onto her back, draping his long body over her spine and dangling his limbs. Heh, his feet didn't even touch the ground from here. Ranmoo markedly did not mind, or even really seem to notice. She plodded forward a few steps to rip some more grass out of the ground, and Ranboo giggled at the strange sensation. It wasn't anything like riding Carl.

He should go inside.

"We should find a way to get mending books," Technoblade was saying as Ranboo crept through the door. He shut it silently, not wanting to disturb them.

"I can see if any of the nearby villagers are librarians. Be the one to trade with 'em so they don't keep racking up their prices on you."

"I don't get why they think I'm such a chump!"

"It's probably the lack of social skills, Mr. I-can't-ask-the-kid-his-name."

Oh, they were talking about him now. Sort of. Ranboo... didn't want to climb the ladder. It'd be rude to interrupt, right? Or was it worse to eavesdrop?

"Okay, you know what."

A giggle. "You social trainwreck."

"In my defense, he never asked mine either."

"Yeah, apparently he was just calling you 'the nice man' until I got here."

"Ohhhhh nooooo, my reputation."

A bright peal of laughter.

"My reputation Phil noooooooo. Nooooooo, someone's calling me 'nice' noooooooo." A pause, then, "Chat stop spamming 'Technonice,' I am the meanest person you know."

"Speaking of, what's Chat think of him?"

"Oh they love him. Every time he's in the room it's like you all over again. They keep *slanderin'* me every time I show him like, basic human decency, like the most *common* of courtesy they're like 'ohhh look at Technoblade he's so soft' and I've gotta be like come on now. Let's get it together."

Who was Chat? Was there a third person hanging around that Ranboo just didn't know about?? Who liked him??? What????

"Oh now they're just spamming Technosoft again. No, no, there go the Technonices it's a mixed bag this time. A combination. Chat can't actually choose, what's this? It's a miracle! Two whole words getting spammed at the same time."

Philza was laughing, but Ranboo was profoundly confused. He did not... get this. At all. He glanced around himself, wondering how to announce his presence without making it obvious that he'd been eavesdropping, and then decided to just. Open the door again, and shut it less-quietly this time.

"Hey Ranboo can you grab some more spruce out of the chest?" Philza called down.

"Yessir!" Ranboo quickly notated *someone named Chat???* in his notebook before resolving to not actually worry about it. They would tell him when they wanted him to know. He climbed the ladder and noticed that his palms were already feeling a little better. So that was nice! Even with all the crafting he'd done earlier! That was good, that was good.

Ranboo handed over the spruce and examined the little room. It was coming along nicely already, Philza perched on the half of the roof that had already been built and Technoblade fussing with the window awnings. It was cozy looking, sort of, he could see the way it was built with beds and bookshelves in mind. It had the potential to be cozy, anyway. Lots of nice potential. Smaller than the main floors and with a petite fireplace behind a grate.

"Hey, Ranboo."

Ranboo's gaze snapped up, stepping back quickly and only narrowly avoiding the ladder opening. "Sir?"

"Just call me Phil, mate." Oh Ranboo would *not* be doing that. "You any good with cooking?"

A "yes sir" hovered on his tongue, but he swallowed it down and merely nodded. He lurched forward to catch the fish tossed down at him, fumbling with them, and slipped them into his inventory before he could do something stupid like drop them.

"Make us lunch, yeah?"

"Yessir," Ranboo answered on reflex, then flinched, ears pinning low. He'd *just* gotten the order and he'd already broken it. But Philza didn't scold, just went "pfft" and went back to fussing with the roofing.

Downstairs, Ranboo gut and sliced the fish, frying the strips on the stove. But, hm, just, *just* meat wasn't much of a meal, right? And they had plenty of carrots and *plenty* of potatoes, so... Ranboo fetched those, too, and roasted them as he fried all of the fish he'd been given. It seemed like a lot of food, but Technoblade was a large man and Ranboo was pretty sure a long journey and a fight would've worked up his masters' appetites.

And well, if nothing else, the leftovers wouldn't spoil in the chests, if there were any.

"We should build a table," Philza remarked when he came down the ladder, some time and many fish later. "Eat somewhere other than the couch."

“You work on that while I find leather and paper. We need books.” Hmmm. Paper. Ranboo also needed to find some of that. Hopefully. His ears and tail twitched at its mention.

“Already angling for an enchantment table?”

“They *stole* my other one!” Technoblade complained with volume that made Ranboo flinch and Philza laugh.

“Ay, smells good mate,” Philza said, patting Ranboo on the shoulder. His ears perked, even as he made himself step out from under the touch so Philza and Technoblade could get at the stove.

Technoblade didn’t move any closer though, just sank heavily into the couch and rubbed his hands up under his mask. Philza brought him food, sitting next to him so their arms were pressed up against one another’s and his inner wing was smushed.

Ranboo... hesitantly took some food for himself. He didn’t want to bother them with questions. Didn’t want to interrupt the way their heads leaned in towards one another and they lingered in that space before eating. He was an outsider, an addition, a stranger past the edge of their familiarity.

Hm. Where should he eat? Should he just... leave?

“So, Ranboo,” Philza said, making Ranboo jump, “Tell us a little about yourself, yeah?”

“Uhm,” Ranboo hesitated, then decided to take a seat on the floor near the couch, close to the wall. “What, what would you like to know sir—I! *Philza*,” he corrected himself with hunched shoulders and a tense jaw.

Philza and Technoblade exchanged a brief glance.

“Anything,” Philza said with a shrug. “All I know about you is that Technoblade found you getting mistreated by some government official he’d pissed off. Took you home. Now we’re here.”

“Um,” he hesitated. What else really was there? “I have a bad memory? So I have to write down things, if I want to be able to remember them. And, I’m half Enderman. Um.” What else what else?!? “Water, um, burns me? A-and I’m tall.” *Idiot*, Philza could see that. “I like animals?” Ranboo tried, his voice pitching higher. He didn’t know what Philza *wanted*.

But that last one seemed to be, if not *it*, close enough? Because Philza looked pleased and Technoblade tilted his head at that.

“Hey so does Techno,” Philza said with a little laugh. “Between the two of you I’m sure we’ll have this place crawling in no time.”

Technoblade snorted. “We *should* actually try and see if we can’t breed turtles this far north,” he mentioned, “They could come in handy.”

“Get another dog or two,” Philza agreed.

“And foxes; I’ve always liked the look of arctic foxes.”

Ranboo listened with perked ears, his tail tip twitching against the floor. He would love that, geeze, that sounded like so many potential animals to just lie down with or curl up against or even just pet

or talk to. Animals tended not to judge him, not like people did, and Ranboo would help! He'd gladly take care of them.

Maybe, maybe these masters would let a cat inside as well? Or maybe Ranboo could just build a little cat house to put nearby, out of his masters' way, and feed whatever strays came to visit, and they wouldn't mind? That would be nice. That would be *so* nice.

"Ranboo, are you hungry?" Philza asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"Oh, uh!" Ranboo glanced down at the food he was holding. "Yes, I, just, uh, I was, um—"

"You were talking," Philza said, "My bad mate. Go ahead and eat."

And well, he'd been given pretty clear permission, so, Ranboo ate.

Slowly, as he did, he felt himself unwind, increment by tiny increment. The fire crackled happily in the hearth, warming the space, sunlight pouring through the windows. The food was hot and there was plenty of it, and not to boast but it tasted *good*. Nobody's eyes were on him, Ranboo's masters focused on their food and on each other, allowing Ranboo to fade into the background like a favored pet might.

He liked these moments better: quiet, no one paying attention to him. Attention *could* mean gentle hands and kind touch, here. Somehow, miraculously, those had become an option. But attention *always* meant the stress that came with being perceived. Too much to consider, too many expectations for his ruined brain to keep up with. It was easier by far for him to sit, silent and uninjured, while his masters ate and rested from their busy morning. And afternoon. It was a late lunch.

Ranboo wondered if Philza had the same work ethic as Technoblade. It seemed likely, from what he'd seen of the two so far. That was. Probably not great, for him. He'd found Technoblade hard to keep up with when he was running off hardly any sleep; Ranboo wasn't sure he wouldn't fall woefully behind with two of them, both well-rested. But he was eating more than usual, so maybe things *could* be okay? And, and they were kind men. Right? Right. Scary and kind. Nice and frightening. Gentle with their livestock, of which Ranboo was part. He'd be okay.

Ranboo's head snapped up when Philza asked a quiet, "You alright mate?"

Ranboo watched Technoblade nudge his forehead up against Philza's, a little tricky with his mask, and he said, "Just good to have you home safe."

Ranboo blinked, then looked down at his lap. Then he let his gaze wander over the house, the crackling fire, the bright windows, the cooling stove and the newly-familiar walls. The words hadn't been for him, and yet something sank into his bones with them anyway.

Home.

Huh.

Me, leaning into Phil's "Angel of Death" thing? It's more likely than you think. Also my headcanon that part of the reason canon!Ranboo likes Phil so much is because he was the first (between him and Techno) to reach out to Ranboo, which we now see flipped in this fic. Also I know the lil Elytra diamonds probably aren't *meant* to look like eyespots, I don't think Elytra users have any natural predators where that'd be necessary, but my minecraft now :3

Comments/concrit always appreciated <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A slave should not be jealous.

It had been a busy first day, Technoblade and Philza displaying all the dizzying work ethic Ranboo had been afraid of. Both of them were far, *far* more dedicated and hard-working than any free people Ranboo had ever interacted with, before. It was intimidating. And exhausting. So really, he shouldn't have any trouble falling asleep in the bed they'd brought into the newly finished third floor.

If nothing else, he shouldn't be *jealous*. It wasn't his place to feel jealous.

The two of them had brought their bed to the third floor too, talk of heat rising and "making a proper bedroom, this go," exchanged lightly between them as they climbed the ladder, Ranboo trailing after. His masters' bed was right there, and he shouldn't stare, and he *shouldn't* feel envious, but.

Technoblade's arms were wrapped around Philza, clinging to him like Ranboo clung to the pillow in his own grip, his mouth pressed to Philza's hair. He'd taken his mask off for the first time since Ranboo had met him, once it was dark and the only light to see by was flickering through the grate. Ranboo hadn't even really conceptualized that it came off. He'd slept with it on before; Ranboo's stupid brain had sort of assumed it was just... part of him. But he took it off, around Philza, and Ranboo wasn't dumb enough to miss that that meant something. Philza's wing was stretched overtop them, a second blanket that further cocooned them in their own little world, one Ranboo was not a part of.

He was so jealous he wanted to *cry*.

He very carefully did not knead his claws into the pillow he clung to, just squeezed it tighter and curled his tail around it, and himself. He *knew* what it was like to have Technoblade hold him, was the problem. He'd been spoiled, and these were the consequences. Now he could imagine the phantom of Technoblade hugging him, heavy arms around his back, breath against his hair. Now he knew what he was missing. What wasn't *his* to have.

He shivered and tucked the blanket in closer around him, despite knowing that he was warmer here than he'd ever been with his last master. (Right? He was pretty sure. If nothing else, the idea suited his melodrama enough to feel true).

He bet Philza's wing was nice to lay under. He knew it was unlikely that he'd ever get to touch them, but feather textures were always so fascinating. He'd pet chickens, before, swept up their feathers when the kitchen had had its way with them. He'd touched pigeon and crow feathers that had fallen from overhead. And Philza's feathers were just so dauntingly massive. What would it feel like, to fall asleep under that kind of wing?

It wasn't his place, it wasn't his place, he was a slave and it was remarkable that they were even letting him sleep in their space at *all*. He could have easily been left on the ground floor, sharing a

wall with Carl and entirely alone. Hell, he could have been left out in the stable *with* Carl. He was lucky, he should be grateful, he was grateful. He was just. He was just also so, so jealous.

He needed to roll over. He needed to not think about it. He needed to not look at them, because looking at them meant wanting to crawl into their bed and lay *with* them and that wasn't allowed, that wasn't allowed, that wasn't something Ranboo could wish for.

He sighed out his nose and shut his prickling eyes. This was what he got for being needy.

For some reason, falling asleep was even harder when he was alone in his bed but he *knew* that there were other people in the room, kind people, one of whom had actually *let* Ranboo under the covers once before. And when he did sleep, he felt as though he was waking to the dawn mere *moments* later, exhausted and itchy-eyed like he hadn't even slept at all.

Mmmnnng... His masters were stirring, Philza's wings making shushing noises as he moved (probably what had woken him), and if they were getting up then he *had* to get up as well. Probably eat something. Go take care of—no, wait, Technoblade had commandeered Carl's care, Ranboo—

Oh, Ranmoo!

He had a cow to take care of! That was right. Oh, and he didn't even need to check his memory book for that one! That was nice, that was really great, actually! He had a cow and he *remembered* that cow and he would get to milk her and have something to actually *drink* and suddenly getting up for the day seemed a lot less terrible.

Philza let out a groan as he stretched his arms and wings out, arching his back where he stood and sounding a bit like the man who played dice on the corner, every time he stood from his stool. Philza flapped his wings twice as he released the stretch, then folded them on his back. Technoblade maneuvered around him with practiced familiarity, dressing for the day with efficiency that was only paused when he stopped to yawn.

Ranboo felt the urge to wish them good morning, but absolutely did *not* want to be first to break the silence. If no one else was saying things, then Ranboo wasn't going to say anything either. Ranboo was actually just gonna leave. Slip down the ladder and out the door, grabbing his coat off the couch arm and shivering in the dawn chill as he went. Except, wait, no, he should bring Ranmoo some feed and also a bucket. He rounded to the stable and pulled that out of the chest Technoblade kept there, then resumed his trek to the paddock.

"Morning, Miss Ranmoo," Ranboo greeted as he ducked into the little shack, Ranmoo mooing at him in such a way that it made him laugh. She huffed at the air with her big pretty nostrils and got up onto her feet, bobbing in the way of big animals as she did, and Ranboo "hmmm"ed happily as he delivered her food to her.

"See, you don't need your stall mucked like Carl does," Ranboo said conversationally as he pet at her flank, "You just use the bathroom outside."

He set the bucket down and sat cross-legged in the straw, Ranmoo preoccupied with her hay. "I wonder if we're going to build a paddock for Carl, too, or if he's going to share with you. Do horses and cows even get along? He's a little grumpy, either way, so he might boss you around. And maybe this would be too small for him anyway." Ranboo didn't have any clear or distinct memories of milking cows, but when he put his hands on her udders he found he did actually know

what to do. Some vague muscle memory combined with a small piece of his brain that hadn't been turned to mush getting prompted by the setting.

"I hope you weren't too cold last night. It's pretty chilly out here," he continued idly as he milked her. Although his half-Ender arms were long enough that he didn't *have* to press his face up against her side, he did anyway, liking the warmth and smell and solidity of her. "Maybe one day I'll have a little extra wool and time to myself and I'll make you a blanket to wear. I could even try to make it match my coat! That could be fun. Then we'd be *double-matchy*, Ranmoo."

Ranmoo was indifferent to this news, focused entirely on her hay. Ranboo's tail was thumping lightly against the ground, getting bits of straw and dirt all caught in it but that should be easy enough to just dust out. He vocalized happily, liking the pshhh-pshhh-pshhh of milk into the bucket.

It was nearly full, when he finished. He set the bucket outside the pen, and brushed Ranmoo with happy little noises for about as long as she let him, until her hay was all eaten and she seemed to want to leave the little shack. Technically he knew the cow wasn't a horse or anything, and she really didn't *need* groomed on a daily basis, especially since she was just going to wander out into the paddock with the snow and dirt and all the elements, but she was *Ranboo's* cow and nobody had impatiently flung open the door of the house to call him back inside yet, so, it was probably fine??? It made him happy and he would make up for wasted time later.

Upon opening the fence, Ranboo took the milk bucket back in hand and Ranmoo wandered out past him to sniff at the snow and scrub. Then Ranboo realized a critical error in his thinking. Probably something he should have considered, he berated himself as he walked back to the house. His masters were smart, though, maybe one of them would know? While Ranboo's hands had remembered the simple motion of how to milk a cow, he was *pretty sure* it wouldn't be so simple to pasteurize the milk he'd gotten.

And that meant having to *ask*.

Ranboo briefly considered just letting himself dehydrate.

At the base of the stairs, Ranboo nearly dropped the bucket entirely when the door opened, Philza stepping out.

"Hey Ranboo. I'm heading over to the village, need anything while I'm there?"

"Uh," he said, tail fuzzed out behind him, "no sir."

"You can just call me Phil, mate."

Oh Ranboo would *not* be doing that. In lieu of answering, Ranboo just nodded his head in what was hopefully an acceptably ambiguous manner. Philza gave him a little nod of his own, chin tilting up with a bright smile, before he hopped up on the railing and took off, massive wings unfurling with a snap that propelled him startlingly high into the air. Ranboo watched him go, then resumed his trek up the stairs.

Technoblade was inside, seated at the crafting table, working on what looked like chair legs. Like table-chairs, not the crafting table's half-stool. Ranboo swallowed. He opened his mouth, but didn't know what to say. A shiver ran through him. Okay, just, just ask, right? Right, he could—this master was kind, he wouldn't punish him for speaking out of turn. Probably. But what if he *did* this

time? It was morning, and mornings tended to make people even crankier, and Ranboo was asking yet another stupid question, pestering him with—

“Did you remember to eat?”

Uh. “N-no sir.”

“You should eat something,” Technoblade said, all without looking up from his work.

“Yessir. Um,” since they were already talking, “do you know, uh, how to pasteurize milk?”

“You heat it up until the surface looks funny—not boiling—and then you hold it there for half an hour,” he said, using a pencil to mark a line on the wood. “Skim the weird stuff off and chill it.”

Okay! Ranboo could do that! Probably.

“To chill, I would just,” Ranboo started, looking out the window.

“Stick it in the snow, yeah, ideally where no one’s gonna trip over it.”

Ranboo nodded, even though Technoblade didn’t seem to be paying attention, and went to the stove. Hm. He set the bucket directly on top of it. They had *some* dishware from Technoblade’s ransacked farmhouse, but only one actual pot and Ranboo would prefer to save that for cooking, and wash it as infrequently as physically possible. He wasn’t sure how he was going to do that, actually. At his last master’s home there’d been other slaves who could do things like dishes and laundry and scrubbing, and yes Ranboo had to make up for it by working hard at his non-watery chores, but it had worked! Here. Here he was the only slave for actual literal miles.

What had happened to yesterday’s dishes? Did Ranboo know?

As the milk was heating, he checked his notebook. Actually, before he tried to find anything!! He took out his second book, flipped to the first clean page after sewing instructions, and wrote down how to pasteurize milk. It’d be pretty annoying if he had to ask Technoblade how to do this every single day. Probably annoying enough that Ranboo would lose his milk-drinking privileges. Okay. That done, he returned to his memory book.

Oh! *Technoblade* had done the dishes yesterday? He appreciated that his past self had been baffled enough by this to make note of it, because his current self was definitely wondering. That. Huh. That was. Well, okay, the two of them possessed terrifying work ethic. So... he guessed that made sense. Something had needed done, and Technoblade had done it. Yeah, that was in line with what Ranboo knew about the man. Okay, yeah.

Something touched his tail, and he startled, his tail jerking. But, oh, no, that was just Technoblade, seated at the crafting table with his arm outstretched. Ranboo bit his lip, nerves all keyed to high alert as Technoblade looked at him sideways, and he gripped his tail and moved it so that it was back in his master’s reach.

“Sorry, sorry sir, just, got surprised.” Ranboo was so tense he practically had a headache from it, but no reprimand came for the fact that he’d, however unintentionally, rejected his master’s touch.

“Eh, shoulda warned you,” Technoblade said carelessly, tugging his fingers through the tuft.

“You’ve got straw in your tail.”

Oh *fuck* Ranboo had forgotten to clean that off.

“Sorry.” Ranboo kept a harsh grip on the skin of his tail, preventing it from jerking or swaying away. Even so, the tip kept twitching (which wasn’t something he could really control), particularly whenever Technoblade’s fingers returned to tug at more straw, and he worried the agitated motion would irritate the man who was only trying to help.

And, admittedly, although Ranboo knew he was only doing it because Ranboo was clearly too dumbshit to be trusted to do it himself, the touch did feel really nice.

“There,” Technoblade said, flicking the last of it into a little pile on the corner of his crafting table with all the wood shavings and the sawdust, “Don’t forget to eat.”

Which, oh, Ranboo *had* forgotten all about that, actually. He ate as the milk... did milk things, then skimmed the top off and set the bucket in the snow outside.

Back inside, he hovered anxiously a moment. Philza was in town. Technoblade was busy. Ranboo was idle, and that was the worst thing a slave could be.

“Would you like me to take care of Carl?” he asked, because normally Carl would’ve eaten by now right? And Technoblade was busy, and Ranboo didn’t mind!

“Fed him while you were milking the cow,” Technoblade said.

“Oh. I could groom him?”

“I groom him in the evenings,” he dismissed. Then paused, sitting up a little straighter. Uh-oh. Technoblade turned to cock his head at Ranboo, making his whole body lock up tighter than a vault. *Oh no.*

“Ranboo, have you been grooming Carl twice a day?”

Was he not *supposed to!*? All he had in his second book was the instructions on how to do horse care and that Carl needed to be fed twice a day! He hadn’t known—but when had that ever been an excuse?

Technoblade’s laugh startled the bejeezus out of him.

“Better that than the other option, I guess. You can chill out a little, kid—yeah I know, I *know* that’s rich, coming from me, thank you Chat.”

Chat?

Who was Chat??

Ranboo hadn’t heard anyone speak???

A quick peek into his memory book revealed nothing that he didn’t currently know. Even so, he penned in *I can’t hear Chat speak???* just to be on the safe side. And then, oh, right, the actual *subject* at hand: *Carl gets groomed once a day.*

“Seriously, don’t stress about it.”

Well Ranboo stressed about *everything* actually, but he appreciated Technoblade's sentiment nonetheless. Particularly since Technoblade, well, owned him, and his mood had a direct correlation with Ranboo's well-being. So really, it was nice that his master was the one saying that!

None of this ultimately solved the problem that Ranboo needed something to do.

"Do you... want help with what you're doing?"

"This? No. But if you want to go mining for iron, we're gonna need a lot to make as many lanterns as Phil wants."

Ranboo's ears perked. He could do that! "Yessir!"

He got his coat back on, actually managed to re-find his hole, and made it all the way to the bottom before he realized that he needed a pickaxe for this.

His cheeks burned as he walked back into the house, flinching as he set his hand on the door handle and shoulders up to his ears as he passed through the doorway. Technoblade glanced at him, but was silent as Ranboo walked past him to the chests, extracted the pickaxe he'd worn at the durability of, and nervously skittered back out the door.

No reprimand came. No comment. But right before the door clicked closed behind him Ranboo heard Technoblade snort and he felt like he could *die* from the mortification on the spot. Fear kept his embarrassment tempered (he knew the impatience that came with his forgetfulness, even if he hadn't reached it for Technoblade just yet) but even so.

He wished his brain would just *work*.

And then he had to re-re-find his hole, again, which, actually, maybe he should just, like, jot down its general direction in his notebook? Yeah. He made a note of it. He hadn't been checking his notebook in the hopes that he had written it down, so he was doubtful that he would remember to check in the future, but at least now if he *did*, he would have instructions for himself.

He threw himself into the work, with gladness and with purpose. He would be good. He would *prove* he was worth keeping. Be *useful*, worthwhile (or at the very least, not entirely *worthless*). He found coal and iron, coal and emeralds, coal and redstone, coal and more iron, coal and lapis, and more coal. They probably didn't actually need this much coal. Or stone. But Ranboo had the double chests, and they were available to him, and if Technoblade and Philza didn't want it they could always throw it out later. He was just... hesitant, he guessed, to throw literally anything away. Even if it was, well, more or less entirely useless.

His inventory was starting to look full enough that he was thinking about turning back to make another dump in the chests when he heard footsteps behind him.

"Hallo."

Ranboo jumped, whirling around and readying his pickaxe like he would for a zombie or a creeper—except *no*! No no no no no Ranboo could not do that ABSOLUTELY not he could not do that that was his *master* and he would not—he *could* not—

"Breathe," Technoblade ordered quickly, releasing the pommel of his blade to hold out his hands, and Ranboo nodded. Don't panic, don't panic, do *not* be a panicky little mess. Technoblade was

kind. Understanding. He probably knew that Ranboo had just been expecting a mob, right?

He didn't seem mad, at the very least. His hand on the hilt of his sword was just a response to Ranboo's reflexive jump. Ranboo was *fine*.

"You've been down here a while," Technoblade said, "And it occurred to Phil and me that you probably don't have a communicator." That was true. Ranboo did not. Honestly he was still pretty excited about having an inventory, instead of just pushing a minecart everywhere. This was so much more efficient. "So here I am. Why don't you come back up and eat something?"

Ranboo nodded, belatedly realizing that he'd been so focused on mining, he'd entirely forgotten that he was hungry. And thirsty. And he kinda needed to use the bathroom. So many bodily functions gone ignored in the face of the soothing rhythm of mining.

Ranboo followed Technoblade back up the mine shaft, his pickaxe nearing the end of its durability, but he'd mined enough iron to replace it, and more. Technoblade had seemed pleased with his haul, when he was looking over Ranboo's chest-for-things-to-keep and his multiple dump chests. Ranboo felt the tentative swell of hope in his chest, which he knew he should know better than to feel but. But!

The phantom touch of broad hands in his hair compelled him. He wanted Technoblade's approval so *badly*. And he shouldn't be acting just for a reward, that would be selfish, but Ranboo couldn't help but want Technoblade to praise him or pat his head or let him curl in close to him again like he had that first night at the cabin and—stop. Stop stop stop.

A job well done should be reward enough.

Oh...

Ranboo's tail drooped. The place he'd stuck the bucket that morning, it was—

"We moved it inside so it didn't freeze," Technoblade informed him, catching where Ranboo was looking. His skin jumped, but his tail flicked back up. Oh, good! That was good then! How long had Ranboo been underground? Eh, it didn't matter.

Philza was back, which made sense, the village was kind of just *right there*. He was sitting at the newly crafted table, four chairs sat around it. Ranboo tried to make sense of what he was working on without looking like he was prying. Little metal pieces sat in a tiny dusting of red powder, which Philza was delicately lifting with tweezers and fitting into whatever it was that he held in his hands. Ranboo trailed after Technoblade, following him to the stove near the fireplace (and oh! Ranboo was also cold. Another bodily function he'd been subconsciously ignoring).

A warm plate with quartered potatoes, a cut of mutton, and spiced *golden carrots* was handed to Ranboo, and Ranboo no longer cared about what Philza was working on.

"Uh?"

"The milk bucket is in the chest near the window," Technoblade informed, like that answered the question of *why Ranboo was holding a plate with golden carrots on it*. This wasn't for him. Right? This *couldn't* be for him. Even just *looking* at them felt wrong, much less holding a plate with them, much less *eating them*.

“Sir?”

Technoblade looked at him, hollow pits in the skull as ominous as visible eyes. Ranboo was being *looked* at and he hated that. He shrunk under the gaze, shoulders hunching up, but—

“You don’t have to say ‘sir’ every time, you can just ask,” Technoblade said. And Ranboo couldn’t tell exactly, but he had a weird feeling of *deja vu* at those words? Had they been said before to him? Oh, gee, maybe? Ohhh, probably, and he was *forgetting*, but that wasn’t even the pressing issue.

“Just, um, this,” Ranboo looked down at the plate again, with *golden carrots on it*, and, hhhgk—

“If you can’t eat it all just save the leftovers for when you’re hungry again,” Technoblade said dismissively, once again *missing the point*.

“There are golden carrots on this plate?” Ranboo tried, voice cracking a little desperately.

“There are,” Technoblade confirmed.

Ranboo and Technoblade stared at one another.

“Can you not eat those?”

“*Can* I?!”

“You tell me! I don’t know your allergies.”

Ranboo flinched at the increased volume, ducking down and nearly tilting the plate enough to drop the food, yanking it back to flat at the last second. “I—I—*permission*? I’m allowed?” Ranboo asked, heartbeat in his ears and breath coming out hard. This was all wrong this was all wrong what was he saying what was he doing his master had *raised his voice* he should be *grovelling* but there was a plate in his hands and he could *not* spill it and—

“Okay breathe, breathe, sorry, let’s just,” Technoblade took the plate of food and set it on the table, next to Philza, who was *looking at Ranboo* with furrowed brows and Ranboo couldn’t quite bite down on the whine that escaped his throat and that was worse because now he was being *noisy* and annoying and, “*breathe*, c’mere.”

Ranboo was pulled in, eyes forced away from Philza as he was pressed once again into the furred neck of Technoblade’s cape. He clung instantly, his arms wrapping up under the heavy red fabric to squeeze at his midsection, face burying into the fluff without hesitation, his tail curling in around them both with a frizzed end. He barely had the presence of mind to keep from clawing at the back of Technoblade’s shirt, his body trembling as Technoblade’s strong arms encircled him and laid comforting weight across his back.

“...*Jesus fuck*, mate.”

“Told you,” Technoblade grunted, sounds closer and strange from how Ranboo’s ear was pressed up against his skin.

And they were, undoubtedly, talking about him, his weird hangups and his failings, but Ranboo was pressed up against his master’s warm solidity with his face hidden in the dark and his back protected by the very arms that could be used to hurt him, so. His brain wasn’t really online enough

to really, process that? Or care. All that mattered was that Technoblade was holding him, and not hurting him, and no one else would hurt him while he was there.

Technoblade moved, a chair scraped against the floor, and then Ranboo was sitting down in Technoblade's lap and curling in tighter into a little ball that clung like a needy child. One of Technoblade's hands brushed slowly up and down his back, murmured reminders to breathe brushing against his ear, and then Philza's chair scraped, followed by a hand petting lightly at Ranboo's hair. He didn't move his face from the cape. He didn't think he could stand to open his eyes right then.

Slowly, like ice melting, Ranboo's muscles started to unclench. His head felt less cotton-stuffed with fear. His breathing didn't rip out of him in desperation or march out with controlled measures. He breathed, he sat, and unsurprisingly he had something of a headache.

He didn't want it to end, the warm arms, the gentle touch, the fingers in his hair or the fur pressed to his nose, but he owed these soft-handed men an apology.

"I'm sorry."

"You back with us?" Philza asked, and Ranboo hadn't technically left, but his brain *had* gone off the rails and he guessed that counted. He nodded, face still pressed into the fur.

"Feel up to eating something?" And that was Technoblade. And this whole stupid panic had *started* because Technoblade wanted him to eat, and had given him food that Ranboo had *questioned* and yeah sure it was far too good for the likes of him but when would Ranboo learn to *shut his stupid mouth* already?

He honestly didn't have much of an appetite anymore, faint nausea its distant replacement, but he knew better than to think that mattered. If Technoblade wanted him to eat, he would eat, and he'd accept whatever he was given, whether *he* thought it was what he deserved or not.

"Yessir."

Technoblade shuffled them so Ranboo was sitting on the chair (and already, he missed the warm touch), then nudged the plate over.

It had gone cold, but Ranboo didn't care. It tasted good, and three bites in Ranboo realized he was, in fact, hungry. Very hungry. He finished the entire plate, more food than he'd ever had in a go, and his stomach felt kind of crampy at the end but he didn't have it in him to regret it. It all tasted so good.

He drank his fill in milk and then all of last night's poor sleep came crashing down on him at once.

It—

He—

He'd just, slept badly, and he'd been mining basically all day, and panicking always took it out of him, and he was full, that was all. He could still get back to work, of course, he was just a little tired, it was fine, except, oh, tiredness made his memory worse (he was pretty sure), so he should write down his notes so far. *went mining for iron, panicked, technoblade held me, ate golden carrots* he wrote, perched on the edge of the couch.

Technoblade was saying something, but he was talking to Philza so Ranboo didn't bother trying to focus. He leaned back a little more heavily, the couch taking his weight, and let his head roll down against the top of the couch's back. As soon as they were done talking, Ranboo would ask if they wanted him to go mining again. It'd be rude to interrupt. He'd just close his eyes while he waited, ears caught on their voices like a boat on the tide, just until they were finished with their conversation.

He woke up horizontal, a blanket draped over him where he laid on the couch. He jolted upright, tail flared out behind him and blanket tangling briefly before falling off. He blinked hard, eyes darting around the room. How long had he been asleep? Where were Technoblade and Philza? What had *happened*?!

Ranboo anxiously paced to the door, then the chests (what would he do near the chests?), then the ladder, twisting his head so one ear cocked to the ground floor and the other listened up. He was alone in the house. Oh boy. Oh boy! He. His coat, okay, he would—no wait wait, he folded the blanket and delicately placed it over the back of the couch, hands tremulous, and he should, where was his memory book? There! Okay, okay, he'd eaten, then nothing. He had nothing. He had no memories of what happened. What happened? He should find Technoblade. Or Philza.

He kind of wanted to find Technoblade though. Which was fine! Right? Technoblade was, like, his primary owner, he'd been the one to initially claim Ranboo. Philza was more recent. Right? Right. Yeah. So it was fine if Ranboo had a teeny tiny internal preference because that was how it worked, right?

The door opened and Ranboo hid his notebook away on instinct. "Oh hey, you're up."

Ranboo nodded as Philza stomped the snow off his boots, tail curling in front of him and tip flicking. This was okay. This was fine! Philza was good. Philza was an authority who could give him direction and accept his apology.

"Sorry, for uh, falling asleep," Ranboo offered weakly, squeezing his wrist.

"You looked like you needed it," Philza dismissed with a shrug. "But, I did finish this," he said, pulling something out of the brewing stands' chest and approaching Ranboo, who managed to squash his reflexive urge to back up into a small little shuffle-shuffle.

"I already synced it to mine and Techno's," Philza informed him, dropping a communicator into Ranboo's palm. Ranboo's eyes widened, tufted end of his tail flaring for an entirely new reason. He turned the device over in his fingers, careful not to drop it (though, he'd heard stories of people getting trampled and their communicators surviving intact—redstone and iron was a different breed of tough). It looked, in all ways, identical to every other communicator Ranboo had ever seen, a smooth hook to secure over the back of Ranboo's ear, a bulbous centerpiece that would broadcast and receive transmissions.

"I, can I put it on?" Ranboo asked excitedly, his tail wagging animatedly and his ears perked upright.

Philza snorted with a little giggle. "That's kinda the point mate."

And so, with another encouraging little nod, Ranboo settled the communicator into the hollow of his ear, securing the band around the shell of cartilage.

“Test,” Philza said, Ranboo hearing him from both the communicator and his mouth, “Test test test. We good?”

“Yessir!” Ranboo said happily, reaching a hand up to touch it.

“See if you can send a message back to me,” Philza prompted, and Ranboo bit his lip. He hadn’t really, before, he, but...

“Um, can you hear this?” he said, tilting his head as he flexed the muscles in his jaw.

“Yep! You’ll get more used to it as you use it, it’ll be less uncomfortable to activate with practice. Try sending one to Techno?”

Which, hm, Ranboo was less eager to do that, since Technoblade wasn’t currently present, and Ranboo didn’t want to interrupt whatever he was doing. But. He also didn’t want to tell Philza no, and, well, Ranboo was very easily persuaded into doing things so.

“Um, hello?” he tried, shifting his attention to Technoblade and... sort of *pushing* those thoughts in the direction of the little device in his ear.

“Halloooo,” Technoblade answered back, making Ranboo jolt just a little before his tail started waving delightedly, ears twitching (and he could feel the weight at the base of his left ear, solid, but not hindering him).

“Philza made me a communicator and asked me to try it out,” Ranboo stated, wanting Technoblade to know he wasn’t just interrupting him for no reason.

“Pog,” Technoblade said mildly, “Sounds clear as day on my end.”

“He says it sounds clear on his end,” Ranboo informed.

“And group feature!” Phil chimed in, once again in Ranboo’s ear and still in front of him.

“Loud and clear,” Technoblade answered back.

“Alright pog.”

“Like there was any doubt.”

“I’m not good with redstone bruh!”

“You’re the best I know.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m good! It just means you’re terrible,” Philza laughed.

“And?”

Ranboo, very timidly, laughed as well. A little breathy sound, barely audible, and he honestly felt like he was buzzing. This was so *exciting*. He knew he probably wouldn’t use it too much, aside from not making his masters climb all the way down the mine shaft to come get him, but the very fact that he had a communicator at all was so!! Wow!! Oh boy!!!

He felt—

Good.

Which was stupid, probably. But he did. Hydrated and fed and he'd fallen asleep in the middle of the day and he hadn't even gotten in trouble for it—one of them had laid a blanket over him! They weren't upset at him at all, they'd given him a communicator, and an inventory and a second book, and when they touched him they touched him kindly and he checked—yeah, they still hadn't hurt him yet.

Philza made a communicator for me he wrote excitedly, his letters kind of big and scribbly, *fell asleep during day, still haven't hurt me*

The door opened and Ranboo jumped, stowing away his book reflexively. But it was just Technoblade, who Ranboo hesitantly smiled at.

“Alright, sugar cane's planted down near the squid pond, also I found a dog.”

Ranboo's whole body perked, ears pointed straight up and tail poised with a curl at the tip. He did? Was it a friendly dog? Would Ranboo get to see the dog?

“Of course you did,” Philza said with a peal of laughter. “Woah! Okay, I can think of a different word to describe that!” he half-shouted when the dog in question trotted in, tongue lolling and staring affectionately up at Technoblade.

“Puppy.”

Philza laughed and Techno pet at its head, scratching behind an ear. “I was thinking ‘wolf’ mate! Jesus. That thing's thicker in the chest than Ranboo is.”

Which did seem pretty true. The wolf-dog was very large, greyish and thickly furred.

“He can still be a puppy when he's big. What should we name him?”

Philza hummed and approached the animal, holding his hand out for it to sniff.

“Max seems pretty popular.”

“Max is a good name,” Philza agreed mildly, scratching beneath the dog's chin.

Ranboo felt that awful, wretched jealousy swelling in him again. He, he wanted to have their attention on him like that (no he didn't, he hated being the center of attention, except with *them*, with their kind hands, now he wanted it? While still fearing it? His brain was a mess), wanted them to touch his ears and hair and face, and he also wanted to pet the dog. That dog looked so friendly and nice. He wanted to sprawl against it and just go nuts. And also maybe brush it, its coat was looking a little, hmm. Maybe they would let him do that sometime.

“Ranboo, would you like to come say hi to Max?” Technoblade asked.

“Yes,” he said, immediately in motion. He held out his hand for Max to sniff, and giggled quietly when Max licked his palm, the saliva gross and slimy. Fortunately saliva counted as not-water so it didn't burn, though, which was lucky! Ranboo would be *very* sad if he couldn't get licked by animals. Or, uh, if the inside of his own mouth was constantly burning.

Ranboo sat on his haunches, only to be immediately bowled over by Max, tail a-wagging, walking straight into his lap. Ranboo let out a startled vwoop, but Philza and Technoblade were chuckling and Max was sniffing loudly and licking Ranboo's face and his own tail thumped against the wooden floor, his hands burying into Max's fur.

"Guess he likes you," Technoblade said approvingly, and Ranboo beamed.

"I, uh, like him too," Ranboo said, unprompted, but they didn't mind him speaking out of turn here and sure enough, all he got was mild noises of agreement from them. He pressed his face into the dog's fur, aware he was probably getting dirty but not really caring.

Eventually Technoblade and Philza had Ranboo come help with their next project, which happened to be fencing in a wide swath of area to be theirs. Ranboo looked around appreciatively at all the lanterns Philza had set up while he was asleep. Ideally, the light and the fences would keep any mobs at bay, and Carl would be given space to roam without fear of predators or wandering off too far. Ranboo would stay in her own little paddock, just because Technoblade was concerned on how territorial Carl would be to start. Best to let them meet each other across a fence, first, where Ranboo would have the option to retreat.

The three of them made solid work on fencing in the area before the sun went down, lanterns filling the space with warm light that cast the snow in welcoming oranges and yellows. While Ranboo honestly felt like he could probably keep going, the scratch on his cheek and rattling sound of bones not too far off made him perfectly happy to follow the other two back inside, Max continuing to trot along at Technoblade's heels. Occasionally he'd bound over to Ranboo or Philza to sniff and lick and receive headpats (and Ranboo checked, neither Technoblade or Philza cared that Ranboo stopped working to pet the dog, they didn't even look at him or anything).

Once inside, Max hopped up onto the couch and laid himself down comfortably, tongue out and ears perked upright.

"You think he was someone else's before he was yours?" Philza asked, giving Max's ear a scratch.

"He certainly acts like it; he's too friendly to be fully feral."

Ranboo sat on the floor in front of the couch and buried both his hands in fur, his nose and mouth and cheeks and generally just his whole entire face getting enthusiastically slobbered all over while he bit down on his laughter. Philza and Technoblade moved through the rest of the space fluidly, each seeming constantly aware of the other's presence and able to predict what he would do. Ranboo wanted to offer to help, but he once again seemed... auxiliary. Unnecessary. He'd probably just get in the way.

Besides, Technoblade was boiling something, and Ranboo got burned enough from regular-temperature water. Yeah, he was fine to sit here and pet the dog. Unless they told him otherwise! Which he would listen very, very attentively for! His skin felt taut, pulled tight over his twitching nerves, but nobody was saying anything. Nobody was mad at him for sitting there with the dog. Right?

He wanted to sit there with the dog. He *seemed* to be allowed. But being totally idle while they were busy with fire and water and food seemed—hhhkg. He should do something. He should *work*, that's what he was there for. But. Sitting next to the couch was so nice, and there really wasn't *room* for him in the kitchen-esque area, and they'd tell him, right? They'd tell him if they wanted him.

He took out his notebook, realized he hadn't even written down anything about Max (stupid, forgetful) and quickly penned in the evening's events. Then it was back to stewing in his own anxiety while the stewpot itself simmered, the easy quiet shared between Technoblade and Philza not half so easy for Ranboo.

He'd. He'd get used to it. Learn their routines. Figure out how to integrate himself into them, without getting in their way.

Oh. Hm.

"Sirs?" No, wait, he could just ask, that was right, "I—can I go check on Ranmoo?"

"Do whatever you want," Technoblade said, stirring the pot.

Ranboo bit his lip and nodded. What a strange response.

"Hi Miss Ranmoo," he said as he approached her, leaning on the fence. She plodded up to him and whuffed at his hands and coat, and he laughed. "No, not yet. I should probably do that while I'm out here though, huh?" He pet at her face and she mooed at him, making him giggle again. "Did you not eat enough grass today? I think that's all you've been doing."

He bonked his head against hers affectionately and then jogged over to grab more hay, giving Carl a nervous wave even though he knew he was just a horse. Carl snorted at him, but otherwise seemed ambivalent. Which was fine. He was Technoblade's horse, and Ranboo wasn't in charge of grooming him right now, and he had a cow to go feed.

She mooed again when he got back in range, this time hopping the fence and patting her side. "Come on. Follow me," he urged, thrilled when she came along after him without a lead or anything. Sure the hay was probably the reason for that. But still! It was nice. He liked it. He liked having a cow and he liked being responsible for his cow.

Well, ultimately, he didn't *have*-have a cow. Technoblade and Philza would have the final say on anything that happened with her. But Technoblade had called her Ranboo's, right? He had, had indicated, somehow, that Ranboo was her primary, if not owner, caretaker. And even if she would never be fully his, she was "his" enough to count, and that made him very happy.

In the lantern light of Ranmoo's little shack (and Ranboo was grateful that Philza had lit up even here), Ranboo penned in a reminder to himself that he needed to take care of Ranmoo in the evenings. He'd nearly forgotten. And it really wouldn't do to leave her out wandering the paddock all night, not until the fences were all put up at *least*, and even then. Even then, Ranboo would probably like her to be inside overnight. Just for safety.

Cowhide really was just an excellent texture. He ran his hands over it, and when his palms began to smart from too much friction on their still-technically-recovering skin he flipped to rubbing his cheek against it. It felt... nice. He hummed to himself, let out a couple little vwoops. Time receded, for a bit.

"Ranboo, dinner's ready," Philza's voice carried, clear as a bell, over their communicators. Time snapped back into place.

"Coming!" he answered back quickly, hopping to his feet.

“Bye Miss Ranmoo,” he said with one final pat to her haunches, then darted inside.

Okay. Okay! Don’t be obnoxious. Don’t ask stupid questions. It. It alarmed Ranboo, still, to act without orders while his masters were *right there*, but the course of action was *obvious* so asking “just to be sure” would annoy them, and he needed to avoid wearing down on their surprisingly generous patience as much as possible. So. He. Made himself walk up to the stove, and ladle stew into a bowl and take a hunk of bread. And sit at the table.

The table where his masters were.

Ho boy.

At least there wasn’t, like, anything noteworthy in the stew. No golden carrots this time! So really, Ranboo should not have any problems just. Eating it. Picking up a spoon and putting it in his mouth.

This shouldn’t be difficult.

He *knew* he was supposed to.

He was literally called in specifically for dinner and he’d eaten at their table before this wasn’t even new, he just. He.

Someone was looking at him. He glanced up, peering through his bangs, and found Technoblade’s mask pointed in his direction. He swallowed nervously and picked up the spoon.

The eyes left him, and he relaxed slightly.

The stew tasted really good.

It still felt wrong, to be just. Eating. But it was what he was supposed to do. Right? Right. Yeah. Yeah, he was fine. He was fine. This was good, he was doing what he was supposed to do and not asking stupid annoying needy questions and it was fine.

“I feel like I should be trying to make conversation,” Philza said mildly, making Technoblade snort.

“The problem is I don’t think there’s really anything to say,” Technoblade agreed. “And we’ve already asked Ranboo to tell us about himself.”

Oh *boy!* Ranboo was being included in the concept of conversation. That was just. That was. Great! Ohhhh that was, that was, mmmmmmm.

Well hey, at least now he wasn’t worried about whether or not he should be eating.

“Uh, is there something, I should say—? Or, ah,” Ranboo made himself shut up. Shut up shut up shut up he wasn’t helping no one asked and *why* hadn’t someone clapped him upside the head to shut him up yet, he was *such* a nuisance—

“You don’t have to. Techno and I usually eat in silence but I feel a wee bit awkward doin’ that with you here. Feels like I’m ignoring you or some shit.”

Ranboo liked being ignored!!! He did very very well when he was ignored!!!!

“You can ignore me,” he offered hesitantly.

“No no no no, that’s not—pffft,” Philza blew at a bang. “Fuck, why am I so bad at this!”

Ranboo winced minutely at the volume, tail thrashing away from Philza’s side of the table.

“So Ranboo what skills do you have?” Technoblade intervened, “Like what did you used to do? Hmmm, job experience, hmmmmmm.”

Ranboo bit his lower lip. That was a *good question* honestly! Ranboo... didn’t super really know. Philza let out a very quiet “Thanks mate,” and Ranboo pulled out his memory book, flipping back to before, back when he’d been with his last master—

Oh gee, he’d already forgotten the man’s name, just ‘sir’ or ‘master’ in his head... it didn’t matter. He had new masters now.

“Uh,” Ranboo said, skimming over his daily notes quickly. It was pretty easy, he wrote a lot less. Mostly just a list of new injuries and what he got them for, *if* he remembered by the time he got the chance to write it down. “I mined a lot,” he said, noting how often *worked in the mines* was lazily scribbled, “and I worked with barn animals?” Apparently he knew how to shear sheep. Maybe it’d be like milking cows and if he ever actually, like, approached sheep, his hands would remember what to do better than his pasta strainer brain did.

Maybe that was part of why he liked Ranmoo so much. A gentle familiarity, even if he couldn’t remember the specifics of the cows he’d met before.

“Nice,” Technoblade remarked mildly as Philza went, “Fair enough.”

And then, because Philza had said that he wanted to make conversation, and that generally required two way input, Ranboo timidly asked, “And, you, sirs?”

Ranboo saw them both lock up and *tensed*. That was wrong, he’d done wrong, he’d fucked it up, he shouldn’t have said anything he should’ve *stopped* while he was *ahead* and he didn’t and now they were going to be mad at him and everything would be terrible.

“So uh, don’t freak out,” Technoblade said. Ranboo was already freaking out! But he listened. “But Phil and I are kinda, eh,” he laughed, breathy and grinning, as he shared a look with Phil.

“War criminals?”

“I was gonna say ‘terrorists.’”

“We’ve done a lot of shit, dude,” Philza said, rubbing a hand over his face before letting out a little peal of giggles.

“Specifically, we target the top dogs in oppressive hierarchies,” Technoblade said, and Ranboo sure did know what all those words meant! Yup. No confusion here!

“Uh?”

“Tyants. Dictators.”

“Assholes who piss down the pecking order.”

Technoblade leveled a finger in Philza's direction and clicked his tongue. "That."

"Oh."

"We also do a lot of mining and farmsteading."

"And Techno grows potatoes."

Technoblade let out a long, long sigh. "I go into *one* hyper-obsessive craze and suddenly it's all anyone remembers me for."

Philza burst out laughing. "Oh mate, you've gotten into more than just *one*."

"Only one about potatoes!"

"Aahahahahah, you're right, you're right. Just the one about potatoes."

"I could be known for so many hyper-obsessive crazes, Phil. So many. My win streaks. Reinventing uses for the wheel. *Something* cool. But of course it's the potatoes!"

Philza was wheeze-laughing at this point, his remaining food utterly forgotten and his feathers ruffling and shaking with his mirth. Ranboo... was also smiling. The volume wasn't great or ideal or anything, but Technoblade wasn't—he wasn't *angry*. Not really. He was huffing and puffing and looking at Philza from the corner of his eye (or, well mask), checking to make sure he laughed.

It was performative anger. Just for fun. Just for jokes. And Ranboo wasn't the punchline, so.

He let Philza's laughter carry over, and his tail swished behind him.

"But, on the topic of farmsteading," Technoblade continued as Philza's laughter wound down, scraping at the bottom of his bowl and popping the spoon into his mouth. He then leveled the utensil at Philza. "Once we get done with the fences tomorrow."

"Bro we've *got* to go by my old place and pick up my shit, dude."

"Read my mind. His old place was close to mine," Technoblade said, his eyes turning briefly back to Ranboo. Ranboo ducked his head, doubling back down on his food, and he felt the heavy weight of his gaze leave him. "So it won't be as long of a trip as getting Phil back from bein' arrested was. Probably back two days after tomorrow, depending how quick we can pack it up and go. We'll take Carl with us, you'll stay here with Ranmoo and Max?"

Max didn't know his name just quite yet, and didn't even twitch at it, still snoozing pleasantly on the couch.

Ranboo nodded, mouth full of rabbit and broccoli. By the time he swallowed, Technoblade had already moved on.

"Shouldn't take too long."

"Yeah. Not all of us obsessively dig vaults every fucking place we go to, so mine's probably more ransacked than yours. I'm just going to find my bird and wear more than exactly one set of clothing," Philza said with a bright chuckle. "And I don't think you want me cutting wing holes in yours."

“I don’t, actually,” Technoblade agreed, his voice lilting up with a small nod, “Amazing how that works.”

The two of them turned in shortly after they’d all finished eating, Philza checking that the fires were still burning and Technoblade grooming Carl before they climbed the ladder, and Ranboo tentatively followed.

It was a mistake.

Lying in bed, the jealousy returned and held a vicegrip on Ranboo’s aching lungs. He curled into as tight of a ball as he could and pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. He was tired enough to sleep, even with the nap he’d taken, but lying there, fully aware of his masters’ bed *so close* to him and how he wasn’t allowed in it, he knew he was just in for a repeat of the night before.

Alarmingly, distressingly, *dangerously*, a thought struck Ranboo. *If I panic, Technoblade would probably comfort me.*

No.

Nooooo, no no no no no, Ranboo would *not* act out for attention. Absolutely not. The thought, unbidden as it was, flooded him with adrenaline and nausea. How could he even *think* something like that?! It didn’t *matter* that Ranboo had no other method of getting that kind touch, that gentle touch, it didn’t *matter!!!* He was enough of a burden with his *actual* panic attacks, he didn’t need to act out *fake* ones for attention! And for what? For his masters to get sick of him even quicker!?

He was working off a *limited* amount of grace here and *yeah* Technoblade had been generous and comforting and sturdy and kind with him but that had an expiration date! That was a finite resource! Ranboo couldn’t afford to dry it up just because he was, he was, *lonely!*

He was disgusted with himself. He had no right to be jealous. No right to envy what wasn’t *meant* to be his. And even through all his self loathing, at his own shock at thoughts that left him aghast, he still looked at them and felt wretchedly, ungratefully *jealous all the same.*

He couldn’t be in the same room as them. His brain was going all wrong. He couldn’t stand to see them and he couldn’t handle what his late night thoughts were doing to him.

Silently, as silent as he’d ever been, he crawled out of bed and crept to the ladder. His ears were at full mast, perked for even the slightest change in breath or shift of movement, but the bedroom remained still.

On the ground floor, he sighed and gave Max a pat on the head. Max lifted his eyes, less bothersome for Ranboo than when people looked at him, and he smiled.

“Move over a little?” Ranboo asked, so soft he could barely hear himself. He crawled over Max (and the wolf-dog really was broader about the chest than Ranboo was) and squirmed his way in between the couch and the pet. He wrapped his arms around Max like he’d done with the pillow, and bit down on an airy chuckle when Max licked at his face.

“Hey, shhhh, go back to sleep,” Ranboo whispered, smiling just a little. He pet behind Max’s ear and draped his tail over the two of them, burrowing down further into the couch cushions. “Just didn’t want to be alone.”

Chapter End Notes

Some fics, for whatever reason: Phil's so competent and good at everything and the best at socialization.

Me, galaxy brained, in parasocial love with this man: they're ALL social idiots, Bront

As always, your lovely comments fuel me, I am so grateful for each and every one <3

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

To the tune of “Shots” by LMFAO:

PETS PETS PETS PETS PETS PETS
EVERYBOOOOOOOOOOOOODY

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Hey.” Warm knuckles brushed against Ranboo’s forehead, and his eyes snapped open.

Technoblade was looking down at him. Oh boy, Ranboo had forgotten how quietly he moved, how early he rose. He felt his ears pin back, his tail curl protectively inwards.

“You okay?”

Technoblade’s voice was soft, quiet in the morning light. Not angry.

Ranboo pressed in further against his touch and was rewarded with fingers in his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. He nodded shallowly with a faint, “Mhm,” and let his eyes slip closed. The thought that Technoblade might strike him anyway, while he was unprepared, flickered through his mind only briefly. This was the *nice* touch.

Technoblade lingered a moment, his warm hand idly stroking Ranboo’s hair and occasionally dragging nails across his scalp, before he cupped the base of Ranboo’s skull, just under the ear, and gave a gentle squeeze. He pat Max twice before moving to his chests, pulling out bread, apples, and three plates.

Ranboo got up—the day was starting, he should work—and Technoblade froze him with, “Eat before you go.”

So Ranboo ate what he was given, Philza showing up with a loud yawn and messy hair when he was about halfway through. Ranboo finished off yesterday’s milk, and took the bucket with him as he gathered feed into his arms and went to greet Ranmoo.

Philza and Technoblade had already started back in on the fences by the time he’d finished milking her, their terrifying work ethic never flagging, and Ranboo sat himself at the crafting table while the milk heated on the stove. When Technoblade came back to construct more fences, Ranboo received an “Oh pog” for his efforts that made his ears perk and his tail thwap happily against the ground. After handing over the fences he’d made, he skimmed the milk and set it to chill, then joined them at the fenceline.

They were done before noon, and Ranboo watched with twitching anxiety as Technoblade and Philza discussed what they should bother to bring with them to Philza’s old base of operations, deciding on mostly food and weapons.

“You’re going to be okay on your own for a few days?” Philza checked, making Ranboo duck his head and stare at the floor.

“Yessir.”

Philza let out a huff, blowing at his bangs. “You can just call me Phil,” he said, and oh Ranboo would *not* be doing that. Even so, Ranboo winced at his tone. He’d annoyed him, he knew this would happen, he should’ve just nodded, should have kept his mouth *shut*.

Philza’s hand came toward him and he flinched, but he was simply clapped on the shoulder, gentle, with a small rub down and back up his arm, before Philza let him go. “We’ll be back soon, yeah?”

Having learned his lesson, Ranboo simply nodded, arm lit up like lanterns where Philza had touched him. He wanted—again. But no, no, Philza and Technoblade were leaving, no more touches for Ranboo. He nevertheless followed after Philza like a wandering puppy. Max was following after Technoblade in much the same manner.

“No, *sit*.”

Max sat.

“Stay.”

Max whined out a little half-howling bark, awooowoo-ing despondently.

“You will be fine. Look, you’re gonna chill here with Ranboo. You like him. I’ll be back soon.”

Max let out an unhappy chuff as he wiggled his head back and forth. Ranboo crouched down next to him in the snow, wrapping his arms around Max’s neck. Above him, Philza chuckled.

“Of course *your* dog has separation anxiety.”

“I don’t appreciate what you are implying, and to his credit I do seem to be developing a habit of bringing creatures to my house and then immediately leaving the day after.”

“Probably should work on that.”

“I’ve got too much I need to do.” Technoblade paused, then cocked a finger at Philza. “Actually, all the times I leave have to do with you, *you* have too much you need help with.”

“Hey!”

“Blame Phil, Max, he is the source of all your sorrows.”

Philza laughed, and Ranboo chuckled a little as well, hiding his face in Max’s fur as he did. Two fingers knocked gently against his hairline, and he looked up at Technoblade.

“You alright?”

Ranboo nodded, tail curling through the snow to flop over his lap and tufted end brushing against Max’s leg. Max bent to sniff at it, and the hot breath was ticklish and made Ranboo’s tail twitch.

Technoblade mounted Carl, Max once again complaining with a sharp bark, but Ranboo held onto him. “We’ll be back soon. Take care of yourself while we’re out.”

Ranboo nodded, and released Max so he could write that down in his notebook. That was an order, so he would have to follow it.

Technoblade urged Carl forward and Philza spread his wings, taking off in flight. Ranboo and Max watched them leave, seated in the snow, and then Ranboo sighed and stood up.

They wouldn’t be gone for as long, this time. Probably. And Ranboo had Miss Ranmoo and Max to keep him company now! Which was nice. Max looked up at him, and Ranboo looked down at him, and slowly, Max’s tail began to wag.

Ranboo smiled. “Hey boy.”

Max got up and did the shuffle-shuffle-paw-step of an excited dog, and Ranboo wondered if anyone had played with him recently. Or groomed him, definitely nobody had groomed him anytime lately.

“Do you know how to play fetch?”

Given that Max went absolutely ballistic at the word, spinning in circles and play-bowing with loud barks, Ranboo was gonna take that as a yes. He got a stick from their wood pile and threw it as hard as he could, which was a pretty okay distance as far as he was concerned, and Max bolted after it, dragging it back to Ranboo with one end long and dangling out of his mouth and the other barely visible on this side of his teeth. Ranboo laughed at how lopsided he looked, but then discovered it was useful, because Max wanted him to wrestle the stick back.

He played with Max until his throwing arm was tired and he was starting to shiver with cold, the wind cutting across the open, snowy plains directly from the ocean. With the sun, the day might not have been so bad, but the windchill was absolutely frigid.

“All done,” he said, petting Max behind the ears. “That’s it for now. I’m cold.”

And nobody was around to tell him to stop being a pansy about it, and Technoblade had specifically instructed him to take care of himself while they were gone. He went inside and stoked the fire, then remembered that food was technically a thing he should probably take care of.

After lunch, he curled up in front of the fireplace with Max, whose puppydog face was *very* hard to say no to, so Ranboo ended up feeding him a couple pieces of his own food. Once his bones felt warm again, Ranboo decided that he really shouldn’t just be lounging around. His masters kept a breakneck pace, they’d expect him to keep at it while they were gone.

Sure, they hadn’t really left him with any specific instructions for while they were out, but Ranboo had managed okay the first time around! He would go mining. He liked doing that. Max lifted his head as Ranboo readied himself, collecting his coat and pickaxe and armor and packing some food into his inventory and also the milk, so he wouldn’t have to worry about pausing in the middle of his task and climbing all the way back up the mineshaft just to climb back down again. Max did not actually get up or follow after, setting his head back down on his paws, and Ranboo chuckled airily and left him there.

Max, after all, did not have any job to speak of. Sitting in front of the fireplace was simply well deserved for being a very good dog. Ranboo stopped by Ranmoo's pen, humming pleasantly to himself with his tail lifted in a little curl. Ranmoo whuffed at him, and tolerated as he climbed on top of her and rubbed his face and hands against her, little more than an ear turned his direction at his presence.

Then it was time to find his mineshaft again.

Okay!

Wait, hadn't he written it down?

Oh he had! That was good, yeah, that was good. That was smart of him. He appreciated his past self for thinking of it. Okay! He went in the direction he'd written down and—oh hey there it was. Awesome.

A day spent mining was a day spent well, as far as Ranboo was concerned. He went until his feet ached and his arms were sore, but like, a... *good* sort of sore? Not like when he was sore and in pain. Just like. Almost-nice? Ranboo was reluctant to label any sort of ache or exertion as a good thing, since, well, he knew how frequently they *very* much were not that. But! He felt good by the time he was done. And productive!

Of course, going that long meant that he uhhhhh. Was out late. And the lanterns didn't quite extend this far, and he had forgotten to bring a lantern with him. But that was fine! He would just, very quietly, very quickly. Make his way back home. Yeah, this was fine.

He was right at the edge of the fenceline when a shadow hissed at him, loud and aggressive. He jumped high enough to scale a tree, skittering back with his eyes searching the heavy shadows for the source—but—!

No, there, down. Growling and hissing with its hackles up. A cat, dark as the shadows it hid in. Ranboo must've stumbled across its hiding spot by mistake.

"Sorry," he said softly, the fur of his own tail sloooowly settling, his heartbeat still loud in his chest. "Didn't, uh, see you there."

The cat yowled and hissed, paw swiping out despite Ranboo now being firmly out of range.

"It's, it's okay," he said, crouching down in the snow. "It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you. Here." He hadn't eaten all of what he'd brought with him, and still had maybe half a fish left, which he now extended to the little black bundle of frightened rage.

It hissed again, eyes reflecting faintly, and Ranboo. Hm. Tossing it was... probably not a good idea? He extended his hand as close to the cat as he dared, then set the fish in the snow, then backed up. He hoped he was close enough to the fence and lanterns that no spiders or zombies or anything would try and take advantage of his distraction.

Slowly, eyes on him the whole time, the cat approached the food. Upon sniffing, it hissed once again, bit down on the fish, and *ran* back into its shadowy hidey-hole. Ranboo's ears perked delightedly, tail in a happy little curl, and he got back to his feet.

“Okay, bye now,” he said into the dark, resuming his trek into the light of the lanterns. He grabbed hay from the stable, and put Ranmoo to bed, even though she was already laying down in her shack, and distributed the valuable items in his inventory into Technoblade’s ground floor chests before deciding to skip the ladder and climb the outside steps. Upon seeing their shadowy silhouettes, he wrote down *make sure the wheat and potatoes are growing okay tomorrow* in his notebook, and returned inside.

Max bolted past him the moment the door was open, crouching to do his business and Ranboo thonked his head against the doorframe. *Duh*. He made a note that he needed to remember to let Max out, since Max did not have thumbs, and could not open doors, *obviously*.

“Good boy, Max,” Ranboo praised, giving Max a lot of attention for not going *inside* the house. Ho boy that could have been. Absolutely terrible. Ranboo’s palms were feeling fine and he did *not* want to have to damage them again—and worse—needing to clean up after Max.

Ranboo fed Max and stretched out on the floor, staring up at the ceiling with his limbs starfished out. Once finished, Max came over and sniffed at Ranboo’s face, then licked his cheek and made him giggle. “You smell awful,” Ranboo said with a little laugh, “Gross! Gross dogbreath.” He pet at Max’s thick fur and decided hey, you know what! He wasn’t super tired just yet, Max needed groomed.

Ranboo combed out *fistfuls* of fur, thick and heavy for the snowy biome, Max happily licking at him and wagging his tail and wiggling and just generally making the task more difficult than it essentially needed to be. But also more fun! Ranboo had nowhere to be, nothing concrete he needed to do, so he took frequent breaks to pet and scratch and bury his face in the scruff of Max’s neck.

It sorta felt like when he would press his face into Technoblade’s cape, just less solid. Ranboo liked that.

“Okay,” Ranboo said, stretching his limbs high above his head, “That’s enough for tonight. I’ll try and finish tomorrow.” He stood, twisting this way and that, then shuffled the doghair out the door. Honestly he could probably make a whole second dog out of that. Max trotted along near his heel, but, hmm.

Dogs could not climb ladders. That was. Hm.

...Ranboo didn’t *have* to sleep in the bed. He sat down on the couch, Max happily hopping up next to him, and reviewed his memory book for the day, taking notes and skimming over what had been written before. Okay, that settled, he—well, he could go get the blanket off his bed. It didn’t have to stay there.

Blanket in tow, *now* he laid down on the couch, curling up around Max again and falling asleep easily.

The next morning was spent with Ranmoo and Max out in Ranmoo’s paddock, Ranboo once again wielding a comb and trying to convince Max to sit still. He seemed desperately curious about what Ranmoo was doing, despite the fact that she was extraordinarily mild-tempered and didn’t actually do much. She tolerated him prancing about her hocks and Ranboo chasing after him with a comb, chewing her cud and plodding a few steps every now and then.

Once the comb finally started coming out reliably clear, Ranboo declared himself victorious and Max fully groomed. And he *did* look a lot better for it! Like he actually belonged to somebody. Ranboo couldn't help but feel kinship with that.

Oh, oh right. He took out his notebook. He'd met a cat last night. Oh, and he wanted to check on the crops, right right right. Okay. He'd leave Max with Ranmoo, make sure everything was growing good, and then see if he couldn't find the cat again.

It took him a fair bit, but he did eventually rediscover where he'd seen the creature the night before. Little pawprints led out in the snow, occasionally crossing with rabbit tracks as Ranboo followed them along.

A high growl had his tail and ears perking up. The cat was perched on a piece of rock face, maybe a little cave or hidey-hole behind it, and Ranboo smiled. "Hello!"

It hissed at him.

"I brought you more fish!"

He set a whole fish in the snow, stepped back only a *few* steps this time, and sat criss-crossed with his tail perked and happy behind him. He waited. The cat stared at him, and he *was* aware that it would actually not take that much effort at all to claw him up pretty badly, but he liked cats. And he knew tails and ears were important body language for them, so he kept his high and upright, consciously stopping his tail from wagging; wagging was *not* cat body language and he would not do it. Right now. Maybe later.

Slowly, the cat approached the fish, hedging back and forth as it did, and ohhhhh. Oh that was a lady cat, because that cat was pregnant.

She was skinny enough that Ranboo knew she had nobody looking after her, and that was a hard job for a lady with kittens in the pot. Ranboo wished he could purr at her, let her know that he was friendly. She paused just behind the fish and swatted at it, dragging it closer with a quick paw and sharp claws, and then chomped it and darted back up to the rock face.

"You don't have to go," Ranboo pleaded, stretching out low in the snow so he was extra short and unimimidating, "I promise I won't take it from you. Pspspspsp! C'mere!" He rubbed his fingers at her, arm outstretched towards the cropping.

She regarded him distrustfully, ripping bites out of the fish.

"Come onnnn, you wanna let me pet you. You wanna let me pet you so bad it makes you look stupid."

She did not, in fact, want to let Ranboo pet her. Despite all his coaxing and cooing, she remained staunchly where she was, glaring from her perch.

Ranboo finally sighed. He should probably try to actually do something, instead of spending all day making kissy noises at animals. "Will I at least get to see you again?"

The cat gave no response, her tail flicking idly, ears swivelling as she stared without blinking.

"Okay. I hope I'll see you again. I'm going to write about you in my notebook now."

And, miraculously enough, the next morning when he was milking Ranmoo, he *did* see her again. She yowled at him from just outside the gate, which, oh!!!!!!!

“Hello!” Ranboo greeted happily, admittedly startled. Ranmoo mooed at the intruder, but thankfully didn’t try to move or kick the bucket over. “I’ve gotta finish milking Miss Ranmoo, but after that I can get you another fish! And probably some of the milk, I don’t need to drink all of it myself.”

Kitty did not respond, just watched him with alert ears and a thrashing tail. Ranboo’s own was moving, but his was definitely a happy motion, excited that *she’d* come to *him*! He could feel it, this was the start of a friendship, should he make her a little cat house? She could probably use a cat house, it was cold out here. Maybe that’d be his fun thing for the day.

He took the milk inside and pasteurized it, since he was pretty sure whatever was bad for people in milk would also be bad for cats, then took a fish and a shallow bowl of hot milk outside with him, using his leg to gently push Max back inside.

“I’ll let you out in a minute, Max. I want the milk bucket to chill without you drinking from it and I don’t want you to scare off my new friend.”

She was, fortunately, still there, now perched on the roof of Ranmoo’s shack, and Ranboo set his offerings down just outside the paddock. “Here you go. You should probably let the milk cool off a little first though. Not that it’s hard with uh,” he gestured at the snowy landscape, despite the fact that he knew she didn’t really understand him.

He shuffled back, but left himself within theoretical reaching range. Tail perked with a little curl, ears up, non-threatening, happy to see her. She growled and hissed at him, but eventually, after a long stretch of Ranboo sitting there (hopefully, so hopefully) she approached.

He watched her eat and drink with nothing short of open delight, having to will himself from reaching out to touch. She was scared. She wasn’t like him. She wouldn’t lean into it and beg for more; if he tried to touch her she would give him a bloody hand for his efforts. He needed to be patient. Let her come to him.

Even if he absolutely did not want to wait and wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch and pet and coo and clean her up a little and take her inside where she’d be warm.

“I wonder what I should call you,” Ranboo mused aloud, quietly so he ideally wouldn’t scare her off. She tensed up, eyes and ears zeroed in on him, but she didn’t bolt. “You’re all pretty and black,” he said, slow-blinking at her deliberately and keeping his tail upright and curled. “I could call you Shadow. Or maybe Smokey. But those are pretty common, huh? I feel like you should have a special name. Nightsky could be pretty, a pretty name for a pretty girl.”

Kitty resumed eating, ears locked on Ranboo at all times.

“Inky, maybe, oh, or Squid! That would be *so* funny. I could call you Kittyboo, since I’m Ranboo, and you’re a cat. Mama, since you’re pregnant. But then I’d end up calling you Miss Mama and I don’t think I like how that sounds.

“I could call you Chocolate, even though I think chocolate is brown, and also sweet. But I don’t know if you are sweet or if you aren’t, huh? You’re still too scared of me for me to know your personality. So Chocolate *could* work. I could name you Coal, but I think that’d be a little rude.

Raven, that would also be funny, that would also be funny. Maybe since you're all closed off and locked up, I could name you Enderchest."

Kitty looked up at him on the last one, then resumed lapping at the milk.

"Yeah? Enderchest? So far that's the only one you've responded to. And, like, you're special, too, and I don't know what secrets you contain, yet. Except for babies, and those are *very* precious treasures for you to be holding. Yeah, yeah, I'm gonna call you Enderchest."

Enderchest sniffed over the bowl and fishbones, checking for anything she missed, and then sniffed in Ranboo's direction. She approached one step closer, scenting the air, probably searching him for more food, then another step.

Ranboo tried, he really tried, to move slowly. To extend his hand carefully and cautiously so he wouldn't spook her.

He couldn't help the noise of disappointment when she skittered back, hissing at him, and he sighed with drooping ears and tail.

Well. He knew she would take some time. No use getting upset about it when he literally *knew* this was going to happen. He stood, watching her dart off, slipped the milk bucket into his inventory, and let Max out before heading to the mines. He let himself drift in the motion, monotonous and rhythmic, so that time blurred and his head was empty save for the sound of his own contented humming.

He was just realizing that he'd forgotten to also bring food when his communicator clicked on.

"Hey, we're back," Philza said, and oh *right!* This trip was shorter than Technoblade's last one, right, they'd been expecting to be back today. Right, right right right. Ranboo climbed the mineshaft quickly and darted over to the house, finding Technoblade standing with Max dancing around his ankles and Philza perched on the porch railing with a crow set on his shoulder.

"Hi mate."

"Hello, sir," Ranboo said, and Philza sighed. Wait was that, was that wrong? Was the sigh directed at Ranboo? He took a half step back, confused and suddenly cold, tail curling in front of him, but Philza just hopped down with a little flap of his wings.

"Phil's fine, Ranboo."

Oh Ranboo would *not* be calling him that.

Fortunately, everyone's attention was suddenly grasped by the crow on Philza's shoulder bowing out, twisting its head this way and that to get a better look at Ranboo and then beaking him on the ear.

"Oh!" Ranboo jolted, not hurt but certainly surprised.

"Twitch, be nice to him, he's skittish," Philza scolded gently, stroking a finger up under the crow's throat.

"I can't tell if they like him or not," Technoblade said, one hand between Max's ears.

“Eh, they got used to Will, Ranboo’ll be a cinch.” Philza held his arm up and the crow stepped onto his bracer—which, actually, in the context of him having a bird, that made sense, that he wore those. Ranboo had actually just thought they were a fashion statement. “Twitch, say hi to Ranboo,” Philza prompted, holding his wrist up in front of Ranboo.

A disturbingly human “Hi!” left Twitch’s beak. Oh boy.

“Hello,” Ranboo returned faintly, staring at the crow with wide eyes. “They’re, uh, they’re, your bird?” Ranboo asked, because his mouth moved faster than his brain. *Obviously* the crow was Philza’s. Who else would they belong to?!

“Yep.” Philza brought his wrist in and pressed his mouth to their feathers, a quick series of little kisses making Twitch poof up before settling back down. “This is my *one* contribution, okay, to the fuckin’ menagerie I know this place is going to turn into. Twitch is mine. Everything else is going to be yours and Techno’s.”

Ranboo’s ears perked up. So, so he *would* be allowed to keep pets of his own? He could, in theory, once she liked him better, bring Enderchest inside? And keep her?

“Help us unpack?” Technoblade suggested, moving a half-step towards the stable and the packs that were piled there.

“Mm!” Ranboo confirmed brightly, rushing forward to assist. “Did—you have a good trip?” he tried, because they were nice, and let him talk, and liked it? When he talked?? Maybe??? He, he couldn’t remember for sure. But that was the impression he had?

“It was fine, Twitch had a lot to say when we arrived and then we just packed shit up.”

“We should get you more than one set of clothes here sooner or later, too,” Technoblade mused. Ranboo smiled. These masters were generous, generous, generous. Books and food and clothes and kind touch and potentially Ranboo could have a cat. Maybe.

“Thank you,” Ranboo said quietly, because he was grateful, because he didn’t know how he could possibly repay them for everything but he knew they deserved his thanks and he would work so hard for them.

Technoblade hummed, taking the pack from Ranboo and beginning to sort items into chests. Ranboo let the two of them handle most of that, because, well, chest organization. But he was happy to hand them things, and keep Max out of Technoblade’s lap.

“I noticed you cleaned him up.”

Ranboo beamed. “There, uh, was a lot of dog hair,” he said stiltedly, because he still was *not* used to being part of, like, *conversations*, but if that was what they wanted from him Ranboo could certainly try. And it was easier this way, with their attention on chests and items, when their gazes were elsewhere and Philza’s eyespots were all curved against the ground so they didn’t look like eyes anymore.

Twitch fluttered over and Ranboo went rigidly still, feeling the crow land on his head. Crows were big. And kinda heavy. And oh boy those sure were claws he could feel, though Twitch didn’t use them to hurt him.

Twitch made a series of kissy noises and then a surprisingly articulate, “Pretty bird!”

“Ranboo’s half Enderman, but nice try,” Philza said conversationally, and Ranboo laughed quietly.

Twitch bobbed their head, weight redistribution making it hard for Ranboo to keep his own head still, then lifted a foot and set it down, then tapped twice against Ranboo’s skull. “Pretty—Enderman!”

“There you’ve got it!” Philza cheered with a laugh, Technoblade snorting loudly.

“I think they like you,” Technoblade said, nudging his head in Ranboo’s direction but not turning or really looking at him fully. Ranboo beamed.

“I, uh, like them too.”

“How are you?” Twitch cawed, then pecked (gently) twice against Ranboo’s hairline.

“Uh.”

“Yeah, Ranboo, how’re you doing? What were you up to while we were out?” Philza followed up. Okay! Ranboo wasn’t sure he wanted to just, like, talk directly to a bird while his masters were right there, even if it was a very smart bird, so he appreciated Philza confirming that he could.

“Um, I met a cat?” Ranboo said, pulling out his memory book. He held it up awkwardly so he didn’t have to tilt his head while Twitch was sitting on him. “She’s still very scared and angry, but I fed her a little and I think she’s warming up to me. I’m, uh, calling her Enderchest?”

“See? Menagerie,” Philza said good-naturedly. Ranboo couldn’t help but bite his lip anyway.

“I uh, groomed Max, and went mining, and checked on the crops, and nothing else,” Ranboo said, skimming over his notes.

“Sounds pleasant,” Technoblade remarked. “Quiet, y’know, I can appreciate that.”

Twitch fluttered back to Philza, perching on his knee, and Ranboo felt an increasingly-familiar stab of jealousy when Philza absently pet the feathers on the back of their head and neck.

Ranboo inched closer. Shuffled up to Technoblade’s side. Hesitated.

“You can come over if you want to,” Technoblade said, and Ranboo slipped over, buzzing with energy and nerves and *want*.

He opened his mouth, *wanting*—but what would he say? Did he really have the guts to ask Technoblade if he’d be willing to pet his hair again? Did Ranboo even *deserve* that?

Technoblade was quiet a moment, then paused in his work to turn, just slightly and extend his arm, pulling back his cape so his side was opened to Ranboo.

Ranboo felt his heartbeat skip, everything suspended in a nervous, aching moment, and then he darted forward, low to the ground with his head on Technoblade’s thigh, curled in close and his tail anxiously tight to his chest, holding his breath as he waited, the moment suspended.

It shuddered out of him as Technoblade’s hand settled in his hair, petting lightly.

“So Phil, where do you want your knee braces?” Technoblade asked, warm hand on Ranboo’s head, switching back to the comfortable conversation and long pauses that he and Philza shared. Ranboo let himself sink into the hard stone floor and skin-warmed cloth and something felt vaguely familiar about this, something he couldn’t quite remember.

“Probably in the bedroom,” Philza said, and Ranboo felt like his eyes were on him but in that moment he couldn’t actually care. He was warm and half hidden and Technoblade was carding strong and gentle fingers through his hair, and something tight in Ranboo’s chest unwound as—for a moment—everything felt alright.

Chapter End Notes

Non-birdnary...

Thanks again to everyone who reads and leaves a kudos, bookmark, or comment, I am still just absolutely flabbergasted by the response this fic has gotten and cannot overstate how happy y'all make me <3

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

This chapter was originally supposed to have two other scenes but each of them got so independently long it is now three chapters XD Ah, such is my curse.

If you are an adult you can come chill in my [personal writing discord](#). (If you're a teenager, I see you and I appreciate you but alas you are not invited. Come back when you're a lil older). It's generally pretty quiet and we don't do much, but I'd like to get the chance to chat with y'all and hear any extra thots™ you have about my work <3

And now without any further ado: the chapter you've all been waiting for!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo bit his lip, opened his mouth, hesitated, and closed his mouth again.

He'd been doing this on and off for a few days now.

The house had been finished and fully furnished, Technoblade and Philza had started a turtle farm, Philza had established some sort of loose trade arrangement with the nearby village (and as a result, Ranboo now had *so* many clothes), Technoblade had shared the paper he made from the sugar cane with Ranboo so he had as much looseleaf as his little half-Ender heart desired, and Enderchest had been slowly, but noticeably warming up to him.

And it was all great! Really, Ranboo was glad to be kept busy.

But there was still just that one thing. That one little thing. That just.

And he knew, he *knew*, that the longer he put it off, the worse it would be for him. He knew he should bring it up sooner rather than later. His masters simultaneously cared more about Ranboo than anyone had ever done before—asking him questions and talking to him and reminding him to eat—and didn't pay a lot of attention to him—didn't look at him and *stare* like so many other free, non-Ender people would (or at least, Ranboo was *pretty* sure he remembered that happening a lot, previously), so it made sense they wouldn't notice. But *he* knew about it and here he was, withholding information from them that was their *right* to know. And, and he hadn't done it on purpose! And these men were kind. Gracious! Accommodating and forgiving, they'd yet to begrudge him... anything.

Ranboo checked his memory book. *they still haven't hurt me*. Ranboo would be okay, it would be okay.

It would be *fine*! But it would also be worse, the longer he put it off. And he'd already put it off for too long, not remembering initially and then just not having the guts to admit to his faults.

Technoblade was looking at him.

Shoot, shoot, abort, abort abort abort, Ranboo couldn't talk about it, he didn't want to make him angry, he couldn't—he didn't—

“Y’know I was gonna see if you were ever just going to say it on your own, but it’s been like a week so I don’t think you are. So. Is there a reason you keep..?” Technoblade gestured vaguely at him.

Ranboo felt his pulse through every inch of his body.

“Cause uh, you keep looking like you want to ask me something,” Technoblade followed up. Ranboo was *not* presumptuous enough to ever describe his *master* as awkward, even in his own head, but if Technoblade had been the same rank as Ranboo, Ranboo might have.

“I, uh,” Ranboo babbled nervously, clutching his memory book between tight fingers as his tail curled around his bent knees, trying to make himself smaller. “I, my collar, sir,” he finally got out, shoulders up to his ears and eyes squeezing reflexively closed. “I, I don’t,” he raised a hand and lifted his chin, tapping his bare neck, “I don’t know what happened to it, a-and I can’t find it.”

“Uhhhh, is it necessary?” Technoblade asked stiffly.

Which, well, that was *Technoblade’s* decision, really, that wasn’t up to Ranboo. “Uh.”

“Cause I may or may not have burned that thing.”

“Oh, uh!” Ranboo didn’t know how to feel about that. “You—you, did?”

“Yeah, remember that one panic attack you had where you just weren’t calming down, back before Phil?”

Ranboo bit his lip. Remembering things was not something he was historically good at. Except, oh! In his inventory still, a reminder!

“With the lemon?” (Actually, Ranboo should probably just toss that thing at this point.)

“Yeah, that one. It looked like it wasn’t exactly helping with the whole,” Technoblade gestured vaguely towards his own neck, “breathing thing. And I kind of hated it anyway, and figured you did too, so uhhhh. Apologies if that was not correct.”

“Oh, uh, no, no, not at all,” Ranboo said nervously. If his master hated the collar, then Ranboo hated it too. “I just, um—”

Technoblade stared at him a moment, the hollows of his mask heavy shadows of attention on Ranboo’s shrinking figure, but then Technoblade shrugged and resumed mining. Ranboo felt his breath come a little easier.

“I, I just,” Ranboo murmured, bracing for Technoblade to look at him again, bring back the heavy weight of his gaze, but he didn’t. Ranboo traded his memory book to grip anxiously at his own pickaxe, twisting it with palms that didn’t ache at all anymore. “I wanted to, um, make sure you knew? A-and learn what happened to it, I guess.”

He didn’t know why he didn’t keep his mouth shut. His master was obviously past the subject. He probably hadn’t wanted his mining interrupted in the first place. Ranboo just—he wanted to explain

himself?? He, he didn't, he wasn't trying to waste Technoblade's time with his stupid fishfacing, but the collar was *important*—

Except, it wasn't? Technoblade had burned it. He hated it. And that meant it didn't matter, and Ranboo hated it too. Which wasn't a very hard thing, all told. Ranboo hadn't... *liked* the collar. It was meant to keep slaves obvious, so that everywhere he went, any eye that landed on him would *know* and cast him in disdain and he would be kept in his place. And, yeah, it *hadn't* been great for the breathing thing. And the material wasn't the nicest. Sure, Ranboo wasn't overly used to existing without it, his neck occasionally prickling with the new sensation of bareness, but it wasn't like he missed it.

And the relief that came with Technoblade knowing, with him having been the one to remove it, with Ranboo *not* being in trouble for having failed to bring it up sooner, that was profound.

“Do you wanna jot it down?” Technoblade asked, and Ranboo jumped at the unexpected words but his tail flicked up. He *did* want to write it down, actually! He wrote *Technoblade burned collar during panic attack* quickly and resumed mining, working in tandem alongside his master in what might be considered companionable silence.

It was. Weird. Having a master that not only didn't *mind* that Ranboo needed to outsource his brain to a notebook, but actively *encouraged* that Ranboo use it. He wasn't accustomed to it, but he was grateful.

“Oh!” Ranboo gasped, staring at the rock wall, pickaxe nearly dropped from his hold. Technoblade whistled.

“Lucky,” he commented, Ranboo still staring at the diamonds he'd unearthed.

“Um.” He. He'd just. Was that normal? Ranboo was *pretty* sure that wasn't normal. And he'd found diamonds before, too, right? He was pretty sure that was right. He, he had, hadn't he? Wait, was he *remembering* that? No, he'd *just* had his memory book open, his eyes must have glanced over it or something.

He glanced at Technoblade, who'd turned away and resumed mining. So. This was Ranboo's to collect, then.

“Yeah, how *did* we find diamonds before gold?” Technoblade murmured, but, it seemed like just musing aloud? Not talking to Ranboo, at least, who was being thankfully ignored, because he was kind of being a gobsmacked idiot. Just—*how?! How* had he managed to dig up *diamonds?! Again?!*

But if he didn't mine them now, his master would get well ahead of him down the mineshaft they were digging, and that wasn't very acceptable now was it? So Ranboo stopped standing there like a gaping moron and hefted his pickaxe again, then worked on catching up.

They'd started mining because Technoblade wanted to make another crown for himself (not that... Ranboo had ever seen the first one? Probably?) and he allegedly just needed one more block of ore to make the size he wanted, but while the two of them had found everything from coal to diamonds, not a *single* block of gold was to be found.

After finding another vein of emeralds, Technoblade huffed loudly in frustration.

“Okay, that’s it, I’m calling it quits and just going to the Nether. At this point there’s some kind of cosmic joke being played on me and I *know* I saw gold on the ceiling not too far from our portal.”

“O-oh, okay. Did, uh, did you want me to keep mining?”

“Nah, go check on your cat or something. See what Phil’s up to. Work on your own projects. I dunno; this mineshaft is just scuffed and I’m sick of it.”

Uh.

Was Ranboo... supposed to have his own projects..? He’d, uh, missed that memo? He checked his memory book. Yeah no, no, nothing. He guessed the little farmland could count? Philza had added pumpkins and melons, because Twitch liked pumpkin seeds and Ranboo liked melons. He could go look after that?? Enderchest definitely counted as his own project, but why would Technoblade differentiate between the two? He flipped back a page, two, brow creased and shoulders hunched to his ears. Nothing. He couldn’t find a *thing* that could have counted as ‘his own project.’

“Ranboo?” Technoblade said very gently, quietly. Ranboo jumped anyway, hiding his book and stepping back on reflex, his tail curled around his legs.

“What’s got you agitated?”

Ranboo glanced at his face, at his mask and what was visible of his chin beneath it. Then he looked away, at the long, dark mineshaft. Technoblade didn’t look upset, didn’t sound upset, Ranboo was *fine*. Don’t panic. Don’t be a bother.

“What, uh, sir, what do you mean by ‘my own projects?’”

“Okay, yeah, fair, I can see how that would be—Chat stop calling me a noob I’m doin’ my best here. Okay.” Technoblade ran a hand up under his mask and Ranboo fidgeted, eyes blown wide and blinklessly dry. “Do you have like, any hobbies? Things you enjoy doing that you would conceivably want to do regularly?”

“Uh.” Uh. “I, uh, Ranmoo?”

“Sure.”

“And Enderchest? And... does, mining count as a hobby?”

“Does it spark joy?”

Ranboo bit his lip. “It’s soothing?”

“Then sure, it could.”

Ranboo didn’t *understand*. What did his master *want* from him?!

“Hey,” Technoblade said, approaching Ranboo and sliding a broad hand up Ranboo’s shoulder. “Stay with me, Ranboo.”

Ranboo nodded, letting himself be physically turned and prompted back up the mineshaft. He walked side by side with his master, which was nerve-wracking in and of itself, particularly when

he was already nervous. But he was staying with him. Honestly, some distant part of Ranboo was surprised he wasn't freaking out harder.

~~(Maybe, just maybe, some idiot piece of his stupid garbage brain thought he was actually safe with Technoblade?)~~

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to," Technoblade said, sounding like he was choosing his words carefully. Ranboo wished that *he* could do that more often. He'd probably run into less trouble, if he did. "But why don't you take some time and like, think about it. What you'd like. Hobbies, you know, stuff you'd wanna work on when you have the time."

Ranboo bit his lip. "I, uh, I've been thinking about making a blanket?"

"Sure," Technoblade said encouragingly. "Just. You know, you don't have to do whatever Phil and I are doing; you can act independently of us ya know. Ya know?" Technoblade pressed his lips thin and breathed out through his nose. "I'm saying 'you know' a lot."

Ranboo couldn't quite help the little jittery snicker that came out of him, at that. Not that he was laughing *at* Technoblade, he'd never ever dream of it, just, it was a little funny. Just maybe a tiny bit. And Ranboo could probably blame it on his nerves, anyway.

"Just," Technoblade said, looking straight forward with a torch in his free hand, "you don't have to have personal projects, but if you want them, go for it."

"Okay, sir," Ranboo said quietly.

When Technoblade removed his hand from Ranboo's shoulder, he felt the absence like ice against skin. He wanted to cling, wanted to stoop down and wrap his arms around Technoblade's, hold his hand, grip his cape like a child with their mother's skirts.

Ranboo made himself take a deep breath.

Projects. Okay. He—really wasn't sure he was going to be able to come up with something on his own, other than the blanket for Ranmoo and trying to make Enderchest like him. She'd been almost-willing to let him touch her, that morning, as he milked Ranmoo and she paced just out of his reach. But, aside from that? What, what else—Ranboo wasn't *meant* to come up with his own activities. He wasn't built for it. He needed his master to do that for him.

Except now his master *had* given him a task, and it was to do it himself.

Ranboo's brain hurt.

He rubbed at his face, attempting to smooth down the muscles in his brow, and then froze, realizing what he was doing. Thoughtlessly, carelessly, he was—showing signs of irritation and fatigue. Practically complaining.

He blinked.

Looked up at Technoblade, who was waiting for him, half turned in his direction and staring at him. Quiet. Not angry.

Ranboo ducked his head, blinking wide eyes, and hastened to catch up, holding himself about the arms. He kept his gaze on the floor as they resumed moving, ears tilted Technoblade's direction and

shoulders tight.

He... unwound, as they walked. Technoblade hadn't remarked on it, and Ranboo was starting to believe that if Technoblade didn't respond immediately, he wouldn't bring it up again later.

He took a deep breath, in through his nose and out through his mouth. If coming up with "projects" for himself was something Technoblade wanted him to do, he would do it. For him. Because he'd asked him to. And, and he'd said—he had *said* that Ranboo didn't *have* to. But. Ranboo wanted to. He wanted to make Technoblade pleased with him, wanted his approval *so* badly.

And, maybe it'd be nice. To carve out little pieces of time to himself between helping Philza and Technoblade. He'd liked it well enough when he was alone in the house before, right?

He glanced at his master, then took out his memory book. His ear twitched when Technoblade switched which hand was carrying the torch, light spilling more effectively onto the pages, but Technoblade said nothing and so neither did Ranboo.

Yeah. He'd done pretty okay for himself, those spans of time when he was alone. He could do more of that, but with people around. He *would*. Oh, but, looking at his notes gave him an idea.

get Ranmoo a boyfriend

Ranboo smiled to himself. There. That was a goal he could work towards, and a project he could work on. He added *befriend Enderchest, make Ranmoo a blanket* and wrote *Projects* in the margin with an arrow pointed at the cluster. Okay, okay, yeah, yeah, okay.

Then he had to put the notebook away because they were climbing, the ground tilting sharply upwards, and Technoblade's hooves had better traction than Ranboo's shoes so he had to focus to keep up.

"Took you long enough," Philza remarked from the little ditch he was digging, which would theoretically end up as a pond right next to the house so the two of them would have an immediately available water source without having to trek out to the squids and turtles.

"Goin' to the Nether."

"Pfft. Okay?"

"We didn't find any gold."

"At *all*?!"

"I'm *going to the Nether*," Technoblade announced with greater vehemence, Ranboo flinching at the irritation in his tone. But Technoblade just kept walking, and Ranboo trailed over closer to where Philza was.

"Do you, ah, need help?"

"Uhhh," Philza contemplated, Twitch fluttering briefly to land on Ranboo's shoulder. They twisted their head this way and that, beaked Ranboo once, and then hopped back down to Philza. "Honestly the hole digging part is just about done," he said, leaning his weight onto the handle of his shovel. "If you want to craft some extra buckets for me so I don't have to make as many trips?"

Ranboo nodded and darted inside, glad he wasn't included in the trip-making. Water. Hhh. Bad. Buckets were good, though, and the iron was a pleasant texture to work with.

Less pleasant was the fact that he got distracted by wind gusting against the window and he fucked one of them up. And it was such a *little* thing. Literally he could just rework the iron and there would be nothing to it. It was a small mistake, inconsequential, nobody had seen it and nobody had to know, and even if they did these masters were generous and forgiving.

But.

It stuck in his head. Clumsy failure. And why was he even feeling bad about this? It *literally* did not matter, this was such a *stupid* thing to be upset over, stupid whiny shit idiot piece of garbage brain that did nothing but panic and *overreact* like a child he was so childish—and *why* did he do this? Why did he act like this!?

Angry, embarrassed, frustrated tears sprung up and he gripped his sleeve over the heel of his palm so he could wipe them away without burning more places of him and this was so *dumb* this was so stupid why was he so upset over *nothing* over ***nothing!*** Over absolutely not a thing! Why was his brain so *worthless*?! Why couldn't he just, for *one fucking day in his life*, get his *shit together*!?

"I hate this," he whispered, palms pressed to his stinging eyes, tail curled in around his ankle and the leg of the crafting table's stool.

He forced himself to breathe deeply, trying to redirect his attention towards something other than his spiraling thoughts. But this was what always happened, right? He fucked up and got upset and swandived so badly that everyone around him got sick and tired and locked him up where he cowered in the dark for *hours* until his idiot brain wore itself down and he was too burnt out to panic anymore and he didn't *want* to he just wanted a brain that would *work* right—breathe. Breathe. In, out, focus on that.

Focus on that. Focus on the iron, inhale slowly, shape the metal, exhale slower. His knee bounced, his tail tightened and twitched against his ankle, whipped out and around, then curled in tight again. He was alone in the house, and let out a long, quiet, frustrated, fluctuating groan/hum that interrupted his deliberate breathing, but that was okay. It was okay, because he was *fine*. He was fine.

He was...

Actually, was he fine? Was he actually calming down?

Crisis averted?

He didn't feel—great, or anything. But he felt better. Like he wasn't about to fall apart at the slightest breeze. Had he, actually, he'd? Calmed *himself* down?

He was pretty sure that had never happened before.

"Hey mate."

Ranboo jumped, the newly-finished bucket in his hands clattering to the floor. The sound *also* startled him, and he leapt from the stool like a spooked cat with a yelp.

“Pfft, easy,” Philza snorted, chuckling brightly at Ranboo’s expense. His cheeks flushed hot and his ears pinned down, heart thudding in his chest. He picked the bucket up, adding it to the small stack in his inventory, and tried to ignore his own embarrassment.

“Hand over the buckets?” Philza asked congenially with an outstretched hand, and Ranboo’s eyes darted to his hand—mm, no, bad idea, eyespots, the eyespots were in his line of sight that way—up—no, bad idea, actual literal eyes, Philza was short and his face was right there—to the side. There was no safe place to look at Philza, not unless his wings were fully folded.

“Yessir,” Ranboo said meekly, passing them from his inventory into Philza’s waiting palm.

Ranboo recognized the sound Philza made as one of irritation before he snapped, “Bruh! Just call me Phil!”

Ranboo lurched back, arms raised protectively over his chest, and the panic he’d staved off *broke*. “I—I’m sorry,” he gasped, because he knew that tone he *knew that tone* that was the “oh you’ve done it now” voice that was the “I’ll really give you something to be sorry about” voice that was the “fucking irritating piece of shit” voice that was the “if I told you once I’ve told you a *thousand times*” voice. And Ranboo—Ranboo couldn’t remember, he couldn’t remember at all, but he must have been told before, he must have forgotten, he *always* forgot, but that was never an excuse and now he’d made his master repeat himself one too many times and he was sorry, sorry, sorry—

“Shit,” Philza hissed, and stepped closer to Ranboo.

Ranboo hit the ground like a sack of bricks, knees loud against the wood and forehead pressed to the floor, arms up covering his head and neck, tail curled in between his stomach and his thighs where it couldn’t be stomped on broken crushed—“I’m *sorry!*”

“Shit, Ranboo, Ranboo—”

Philza was close, next to him, he could hear him, feel his presence, feel the weight of his eyes bearing down on him. “I’m sorry Master Philza!” he cried, though he’d already forgotten what he was sorry for. “I’m so sorry sir, I’m so sorry!” He couldn’t breathe, the world was tilting around his closed eyes, he might not know *why* but he knew he was sorry, that there was little he regretted as much as reaching the end of this kind man’s patience.

(And if he were to reach the end of Technoblade’s—)

“It’s not that big a deal!” Philza shouted, Ranboo cowering and shaking at the volume, tears burning his face painfully as he gasped, he couldn’t *breathe!*

“Shit, fuck!” Philza’s hands were light on Ranboo’s wrists, his arms, his back, grazing across looking for the best place to strike the best place to make it *hurt* and Ranboo deserved it he knew he did but he was sorry he didn’t want to be hurt he didn’t want to *upset* Philza he wanted to be *good* and now he’d ruined it he always ruined it it was his fault and he deserved this but he was *sorry!*

“Techno how do I stop him from panicking?!”

Ranboo keened, high and breathless, because no, please. Not Technoblade, no, he didn’t want to disappoint him too he didn’t want him to be angry as well he couldn’t handle it he couldn’t *handle* it and Technoblade was so large, he was *strong*, when he hurt Ranboo it would hurt *so bad* and

Ranboo wailed, Ender and aching, as the air around him hummed high with panicked static that crescendoed around his open mouth, his dripping teeth, the skin crawling over his rattling bones.

Philza was moving.

The world was spotting. Darker. Dizzy.

A hand on the neck of his coat, pulling, his coat's open front slipping up around his shoulders while he remained firmly pressed to the floor. Words were being said. Philza was speaking, and Ranboo, useless, couldn't even collect himself enough to hear them. The hand released, only to grip his hair and pull.

"Bite!"

Ranboo bit, and wailed, recoiled, skittering back and colliding with the crafting table's stool. That—no, wait, lemon, he had a lemon in his—right—Philza—like Technoblade—Ranboo had read about—he could breathe he sucked in air desperately he could breathe he needed air his mouth *hurt* from how loud the taste was on his tongue (his face hurt from the saltwater streaking down it) god, god, *god*.

"Fuck," Philza breathed, kneeling in front of Ranboo, hands up, lemon still held in one. "Ranboo, Ranboo?"

Ranboo tried to swallow, holding his breath for just that moment and then gasping, closing his eyes and nodding. He didn't know what he was nodding to. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

"Hey. Come here?"

Ranboo watched with stunned eyes as Philza let the lemon drop to the floor, bouncing shallowly twice, and extended his arms towards him. He jerked forward, hesitated, but Philza didn't retract his arms, didn't change his mind and hurt him, and so he darted the rest of the way, curled awkwardly against Philza's small frame and clinging to him with a shuddering gasp.

"Fuck, there you go, there you go, I've got you, shhh," Philza soothed, arms thinner than Technoblade's but still strong, secure, holding him, petting up and down his back. Ranboo choked and sobbed loudly, pressing his face to Philza's haori and letting the dark cloth soak the tears. Fuck, he *hurt*, every muscle in his body aching with tension like a jaw clenched too tight.

"I'm sorry Ranboo," Philza murmured, pressing his mouth to Ranboo's hair and cupping the other side with his hand, before resuming petting up and down his back. "I didn't mean to scare you like that, I didn't mean to snap."

"I—" Ranboo hiccupped, trembling in Philza's hold. He'd forgotten, he couldn't remember, what had Philza snapped about? What had Ranboo done?

"Shhh, breathe for me."

Ranboo nodded and took deep, gulping breaths, gripping at the cloth on Philza's back and trying to remember not to claw at him.

"What—did I—I don't, remember," Ranboo tried, but he wanted to do better he wanted to do right he wanted to make it so this didn't have to happen again he wanted to know what he'd done *wrong*,

“why did, why—I upset you?”

“It wasn’t hardly anything,” Philza said gently, “You called me ‘sir’ again and I got a little cross with you in the reminder.” Philza fingers were different in Ranboo’s hair than Technoblade’s, gripping gently and straightening in little rows. “I should’ve just told you to call me Phil like I normally do, I’m sorry.” Another stab of panic shuddered through Ranboo at that. Philza wanted him to *what?!*

Then, heavier, cautious and prodding, Philza added, “...you also called me ‘master Philza’ while you were panicking, there.”

Ranboo looked up from where he was half-draped over Philza’s lap, curled tight and still so clumsily tall against Philza’s smaller frame. “Yes?” Was that—not right? Was it only supposed to be Technoblade? Had Ranboo misjudged? It seemed like they shared all their other property, but maybe Ranboo was special.

Philza’s eyes darted over Ranboo’s uncomprehending face, little, sharp motions, and an emotion Ranboo wasn’t smart enough to parse slowly overtook his features. It. Didn’t look like a good one though.

Heavy, rushed footfalls on every other stair and then the door flung open, Technoblade breathing hard and hair askew, sounding and looking every ounce like he’d run all the way here from halfway through the Nether. Ranboo jolted at the sudden noise, gripping Philza tighter and curling closer, but he relaxed (minutely) when he saw who it was.

Philza’s fingers tapped twice against Ranboo’s shoulder with a muttered, “Hold that thought.” Then, at volume, he asked, “Techno, you did *tell* him he’s not a slave anymore, right?”

For a long moment, Technoblade hovered in the doorway, tiny shifts in his mask the only indication that he was looking between Ranboo and Philza. “...Uh.”

Philza covered his face with one hand, breathing in deeply. “Jesus *fucking Christ!*”

Ranboo flinched at the tone, fuck, fuck fuck fuck fuck—

“Not at you, not at you,” Philza rushed, hand on Ranboo’s face, then hair, then neck then back then face again, “Not you, that was not directed at you Ranboo. You’re fine, you’re okay, breathe, shit, it’s alright.”

Ranboo felt he could pretty safely state that *nothing* was alright and *nothing* had ever been alright or would ever be alright but he breathed, he breathed, and then the words actually sank in.

Not a slave anymore.

He.

He... what?

“What?” Ranboo gasped, reedy and breathless again, his thin chest heaving but it wasn’t enough, it wasn’t enough air, there wasn’t enough air in all the world, the cabin, which had grown to feel so cozy and homey, was now suffocating, small and getting smaller, closing in. “I’m—I’m? What? You’re not—I’m not—*what!?*”

“Ranboo,” Philza started, and without even thinking Ranboo cut him off, black and white fingers gripping the front of the haori hard and pulling himself up, looking straight at the brim of Philza’s hat.

“What do you mean I’m not a slave anymore!?” Ranboo cried, eyes wide and fangs feeling too big for his mouth.

“Shit, Ranboo, *easy*,” Philza tried, Technoblade’s hooves making what *should* have been a reassuring noise against the wood as he approached, knelt down.

“Easy,” Technoblade shushed with his palms flat out and up, staring at Ranboo and Ranboo stared back, his head twisting to look between both masters—except they weren’t?! He was—? What *was* he then, if not a slave?

“What, what do you mean?” Ranboo whined, tears starting to fall again, searching both their body languages for answers, their expressions for clues, even crossing brief paths with their eyes in the hopes that he would find some sort of explanation.

“Ranboo, hey,” Technoblade said, reaching forward—but then he stopped. “This whole time..?” he murmured, line of sight falling to his own hands and he. Retracted them. And Ranboo let out a distressed vocalization, head pitching forward, fists shaking beneath Philza’s hands as his world went wrong. He wasn’t a slave, and Technoblade wouldn’t touch him now, and Ranboo could think of nothing more incomprehensible, and no fate possibly worse.

“You’re just a person, Ranboo,” Philza was saying, the words barely hitting his ears. “Just some dude, same as everyone else. It’s—fuck, we’re not going to hurt you.”

Yeah, but apparently Technoblade wasn’t going to touch him anymore, either; Ranboo’s freedom had *poisoned* that somehow. Technoblade was just going to stare at him from behind his skull sockets and remove the only stable fact Ranboo had ever had in his life: that he was a slave and this was his place and that was that. No matter what he forgot, no matter what changes were made, he’d always at least known that.

Now he knew nothing! He didn’t know a fucking thing! And his body ached and his eyes and cheeks *hurt* and his throat was raw and he couldn’t breathe and the space was closing in around him and his skin crawled with whatever filth had now stained him and he didn’t know and he couldn’t breathe and he couldn’t see and and and and and and and he—

Bolted.

Out the open door as fast as his long legs would take him. He knew, on some level, he shouldn’t; that running and hiding were just one way tickets to a worse punishment, but the cabin was too small and there wasn’t enough air and the only things that still seemed to work in his brain was his stupid fight or flight and hey! He was free, right? So they, so they couldn’t, then, hurt him, right? Hunt him down with dogs and arrows and drag him back by his ankles as a punishment for running. He laughed hysterically, wet, staggering as he went, shoulder colliding hard into a tree but it kept him upright and he kept going until his legs gave out from under him and he hurled, his sick steaming in the snow.

He shuffled blearily over and curled on his side in the cold, mouth open and making every distressed noise his body seemed capable of producing, fingers gripping at his head and tail curled in tight to his chest.

He wished he would pass out. He wanted it to *stop*! He wept. He wanted it to stop he wanted it to end he wanted it to stop so badly he wanted everything to stop he couldn't *handle* this.

He sobbed, halfway to a scream, and sank his claws into the bark of a nearby tree and yanked, raking deep scores into the wood.

A cat hissed.

It stunned him, eyes wide, suspending him inside a moment when all he did was drag ragged air into his lungs.

Then he sat up on his elbows, looking and—there.

“Enderchest?” he asked hoarsely, blinking, almost sure that if he blinked enough times she wouldn't be there, heavily pregnant and glaring suspiciously at him.

A rumbling growl-meow came out of her, tail flicking agitatedly.

And—his life still felt like it was falling apart. He still felt like one raw, continuous nerve that had been sandpapered down to its final thread. His body still ached and his head was still a swirling mess of confusion and fear ~~and anger~~ and disorientation. He was still so impossibly, unbelievably upset.

But Enderchest had almost let him pet her, that morning. If he—acted, on any of that, he'd scare her more, confirm her hissing suspicions and turn that cautious glare hard and permanent. He could ruin the fragile trust he'd managed to establish. He might never see her again.

He forced a deep breath. Forced his words to come out calm. “Hey,” he said, voice shaky and kind of squeaky from overuse. “Sorry, Enderchest, I didn't mean to scare you.”

Enderchest's ears flicked up, and Ranboo felt a twist in his heart. She was still—thank goodness. Cautiously, she approached him, out of arm's length and scenting the air. He chuckled wetly.

“I don't think I have any food on me this time.”

Oh, but a quick perusal of his inventory did show that he still had milk. Nothing to pour it into for her to drink out of, though. He scanned the area, found a decently-sized rock, and pooled a small puddle into a divot in its surface. He had a headache the size of a barn. His face hurt. He stuck the milk back in his inventory.

His memory book was in his inventory, too.

He... didn't want to remember this. He wanted it to all go away. He wanted to go back to how things had been when he understood them, when he wasn't *miserable* like he was now, when tentative hope was still a thing he was feeling.

Enderchest hopped up onto the rock, sniffing at the milk before lapping at it.

Ranboo took out his memory with a sigh, sitting down in the snow and leaning his back against a tree.

He stared at the most recent page, wondering what he should even write.

Philza asked me to make buckets, he started with, since that was the easiest, and he would undoubtedly forget soon. It was a miracle he hadn't yet. *panicked*, *Philza had lemon bite*, *Technoblade ran home*, even with everything, it still warmed a piece of Ranboo to know that *he'd* prompted that, that Technoblade had literally ran for Ranboo's sake.

Then the hard part.

I'm not a slave anymore

He wanted to put a question mark, wanted so badly to believe that he'd somehow misunderstood, that things made sense, that he was just too stupid to figure out *how* they made sense on his own. But he knew a question mark would be disingenuous. He knew.

The urge to throw his memory book as far away as he could seized him, and he only barely resisted. He'd frighten Enderchest. She was right there. Practically within touching range. Looking at him, in the harmless way of animals observing (though with his frayed nerves, it still managed to agitate him, if only slightly).

"Sorry," Ranboo gasped around a harsh swallow, tilting his head back to lean against the tree he was propped against. "I'm not, ah, exactly good company, um, right now."

He tried to breathe, tried to think, ended up only doing one. He wanted to *scream* (he couldn't, he couldn't, he couldn't scare her) he wanted to lash out and sink his claws into the trees again (he couldn't, he couldn't, he couldn't risk hurting her) and he wanted someone to tell him what to *do* because life was just a swirling vortex of uncertainty right now.

Enderchest hopped down from the rock, approaching him, and... she was in touching range. She was. Right next to his hand, actually, white skin in pale snow. Sniffing. Close.

He held very, very, very still, pretty sure that his hands would shake anyway if he moved them.

She looked up at him, and, without any hissing or growling, meowed at him.

Slowly, so slowly his hand and wrist ached with tension, he lifted his palm. She watched the movement closely, her little body tense, then sniffed his hand when he held it frozen, suspended in midair. She—

She bumped her head up against it, Ranboo's lips parting as a small "oh" escaped him. Then she hissed at him, much lighter than her usual "FUCK OFF" type hiss, turned, and left.

He stared after her.

Oh.

He sat there, leaned against the tree, exhausted and shaky and sore, for who knew how long. Long enough for the cold to set into his bones. Long enough for the sun to inch down, shadows noticeably longer than when he'd started.

He.

Should go home.

He didn't. He didn't want to have whatever conversation they were going to have to have. He didn't want to know what waited for him there. But he didn't want to stay out in the cold, alone, and he *couldn't* stay there forever. So.

Time to go. Go home, go apologize for the... everything, go try and figure out what his life was supposed to be now.

His legs were stiff and sore as he clambered slowly to them, pins and needles in one and general aching in the other. Fortunately, his panicked running had left quite the trail in the snow, and no more had fallen to cover the tracks. He could make his way back without any trouble.

It was about halfway, more or less, back to the house that Ranboo realized that the birds hopping and fluttering between the trees was actually just one bird specifically, and that the bird in question was following him.

He squinted upward, making out a black shape among the pine needles.

"Twitch?"

They cawed, then coasted down, fluttering briefly before coming to perch on his shoulder.

"Dadza!" they announced right in his ear, and he snorted.

"I, uh, think it's pronounced 'Philza,' buddy."

Twitch cawed extra loud. "Dadza! Dadza!"

"Okay, okay!" Ranboo laughed weakly, "You're *right* in my ear, geeze." Ranboo lifted a finger up to Twitch, their head twitching this way and that as they inspected it, and then they beaked him gently. He brushed the finger up against their breast feathers, enjoying the texture, and kept following his tracks home.

"I guess he's the one who asked you to follow me?"

"Enderman!"

"You're a very smart bird, you know that Twitch?"

"Good boy!"

Ranboo laughed again, a little louder that time. "You *are* a good boy. Or girl. Bird." Ranboo scratched at their head. "Thanks for watching out for me."

At the edge of the tree line, saplings scattered about, Ranboo hesitated. The cabin looked as it always did, wooden and charming with smoke puffing out of the chimney. It didn't look as welcoming as it normally did, but Ranboo could pretty safely blame his brain for that one.

He approached timidly, quietly, Twitch perched on his shoulder and occasionally ducking their head down to pick at their wing. At the base of the stairs, he could start to make out conversation.

"...don't *know*! Will was never like this! I mean, drama, yeah, obviously the kid was prone to theatrics, constant theatrics, but never *panics*! I don't have experience with—I don't know!"

Philza's voice. And those were Technoblade's hooves clopping against the flooring, loud as he audibly paced the width of the room.

"Chat can you *please* lay off even the *tiniest* bit right now? I promise I don't need your help."

"Bugger off Chat," Philza sighed. "We both feel like shit; don't worry about *that*."

They felt—

Ranboo stared at the wooden door in front of him. Both their voices sounded about as bad as his did. They were worried about him. Philza had sent Twitch, Technoblade was pacing (audibly, at that), he'd reacted *terribly* and they were still—they were—

Ranboo considered staying quiet, eavesdropping a little longer, only briefly, but he was tired, and he was *cold*, and Twitch would give him away if he didn't announce himself, and Technoblade and Philza were worried about him. So. He knocked on the door, quiet and shy because what if he was reading too much into it, what if their words had meant something else entirely, what if—

The door opened nearly instantaneously, Technoblade looking up at him despite his hunch, despite all his attempts to make himself smaller, and there was no missing Technoblade's breath of relief. He wasn't wearing his mask or cape, and he looked, somehow both less and more impressive without them.

Twitch cawed and fluttered inside, Philza absently lifting an arm for them to perch on, his attention equally fixed on Ranboo.

Technoblade extended an arm, the door open, warmth spilling out, and Ranboo did not wait, that time, for Technoblade to hesitate, or rescind the offer. He sank bodily into the embrace, his own breath coming out with shuddering relief as he was held again, welcomed inside without a word.

Chapter End Notes

I know this isn't like the BEST stopping place in the world but like I mentioned earlier: we got three chapters out of this plotpoint soooooooo. See you next week! As always, your comments fuel me <3

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

What happens when three socially inept people attempt to have a lengthy conversation? This.

Man how do all these chapters keep getting so *long*? I stg I'm gonna write a short one someday.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Okay,” Philza said, nearly an hour later, with Ranboo bundled in two different blankets and half-hidden beneath Technoblade’s cape, curled in Technoblade’s lap on the couch, more of the crushed cactus dabbed gently across his cheeks. No one had said anything from the moment he’d knocked on the door, except for murmured reassurances and “hey, come here”s that made him feel noodly and warm—and Twitch, but Ranboo was pretty sure they didn’t really count. “I hate me for this, you both hate me for this, but we need to talk about what happened.”

Technoblade groaned quietly, only really audible because Ranboo’s ear was pressed up against his shoulder, and Ranboo’s aching body tensed.

Technoblade let out a long, heavy sigh. “I know,” he said, “I know, but do we *have* to?”

Ranboo shared that sentiment. He’d like to just go to sleep for a year or two and wake up and everything be fine and normal—but he didn’t get wishes, much less fantastical wishes, so he shifted, pulling himself a little more upright, and braced himself for whatever unpleasanties were about to happen to him. Philza’s hand, which had been warm and rubbing slowly up and down his back, squeezed his shoulder.

“Yeah mate.”

Technoblade let out a sigh, shifting so he was also straighter on the couch, Ranboo moving awkwardly as he did.

Technoblade and Philza both looked directly at Ranboo for a moment, making his shoulders hunch under their scrutiny, and then Technoblade’s hand was in his hair and he leaned into it, grounding him.

“So we’re *not* upset with you,” Technoblade started, loud and firm, and Ranboo lifted his hands to cup Technoblade’s wrist and forearm and tugged so he could press his mouth to the inside of his palm.

“Mm,” Ranboo hummed, tail curled in his lap.

“And we’re not going to hurt you,” Philza agreed. “We just need to talk. You don’t have to be frightened.”

Ranboo closed his eyes and nodded. They were still comforting him, even after he'd ran off on them. They still hadn't hurt him. They weren't going to.

Talking.

He could. He could handle talking. Probably.

"Alright, so," Philza started, then huffed air out his nose. "Let's start with this: Ranboo, you thought you were still a slave this whole time?"

Ranboo pressed his side against Technoblade's chest, wishing he could hide, that he could melt, that he could be anything other than the center of attention. He could not. "Yessir."

"I—" Philza blew air out his nose. "Okay. And you thought both Techno and I were your owners?"

Ranboo nodded.

"Do you want to write down that we aren't?" Technoblade suggested, and Ranboo pulled out his memory book. He'd written it down already, right? Right, there it was.

"I have, sir," he said meekly, but didn't stow his book away in his inventory just yet. He had a feeling he'd be needing it still.

"Can you... elaborate on it?" Philza asked.

"Um?"

"Like, *why*? Why did you think you were still a slave? What's the reasoning there, what's been goin' on inside your head, Ranboo?"

"O-oh, uh." Ranboo bit his lip, and flipped his memory book back open. He skimmed over it, but his notebook wasn't really a reflection of what was going on inside his head. More just events of importance and snippets that would prompt his actual memory into working again.

"I..." Ranboo flipped all the way back, to the very first page. "I've, always been a slave?" he started hesitantly. "A-and, and I don't—I can't really—" Ranboo bit his lip. "Why, why," his stomach churned at questioning his masters—no, his, Technoblade and Philza—but if they were talking, if Ranboo was going to answer their questions like he'd been told to, "Why am I *not* a slave anymore?"

"Because Phil and I believe in full autonomy of the self," Technoblade said, his strong hands adjusting the blankets around Ranboo's shoulders and picking lint off. "Nobody should own another person, full stop. It's a cruel and unjust system that deserves to be eradicated."

Ranboo stared at his chin, hopelessly lost. He glanced at his memory book—but no, he'd not find answers there—and asked, "What, um, does, 'autonomy' mean?"

"Control over your own person and actions. Freedom to make your own choices."

Ranboo didn't *want*—

It didn't matter, it didn't matter, it didn't matter, except maybe it did???

“S-sir?”

A kind hand petting down his hair, Technoblade nodding at him to continue.

“I, I don’t, *want* to make my own choices,” he said, and he could *hear* himself whining but, but, but!

“Shhhh, shshsh,” Philza hushed him, hand on his back.

“Please, I’m scared—”

“Shhhhh.”

“We know,” Technoblade said softly, gripping Ranboo’s hand. He squeezed in return, but Technoblade was so strong he probably hardly felt it. “We know, we’re not saying we’re just gonna cut you loose or anything, we don’t *want* to scare you, Ranboo.”

“Please,” he repeated, knees drawn close to his chest and Technoblade’s hand clutched between the two, his eyes stinging with tears he almost felt too wrung out to shed.

“Ranboo,” Philza crooned, brushing his hair from his face and brushing a wing out in front of them, cocooning them on the couch and making the world seem a little less dauntingly limitless. Philza’s wings smelled nice too, Ranboo noted distantly, clinging to small details. “Nothing bad is happening. But we need to understand each other better or this is just going to keep on repeating.”

“Unfortunately, Phil’s right.”

Ranboo forced himself to take a deep breath, and nodded. Talking, talking, he could talk, usually he had the *opposite* problem, so. He could open up his shit idiot mouth. If he had to. If it was what his ma—the kind men who were gentle with him, wanted.

But *what* did they want? What should he *say*? What information could he give them that would suit them? He couldn’t—he wished he could just transfer his brain over to them so they could take whatever they needed from it—Oh!

He opened up his memory book.

“I, I met Technoblade when I was being punished,” he said, written words prompting the memory of a dark cell and cold stone, but also of warm cloth and permission to touch. His eyes lingered on that passage, the distant feeling of comfort that came from that first meeting luring him like flame might a moth, here in this turbulent present.

“He stole me?” Ranboo added hesitantly, forcing himself forward, “After almost being executed.” Right, right, there’d been—the pole, he was *strong*, right that was right.

“I mean, I would have preferred the term ‘rescued.’”

“Techno, let him finish.”

“My bad, my bad.” Technoblade nudged Ranboo lightly, “Go ahead.”

Ranboo took a deep, shaky breath. He tried to skim for important parts, things that would mean—something, to his—to these men. A ransacked farmhouse, the Nether. “The Nether portals make me

nauseous?” He didn’t know if that was relevant or not.

Philza snorted, making Ranboo flinch and stare over at his chin.

“Yeah they’re a bitch to go through,” Philza explained, “You get used to ‘em though.”

Ranboo would prefer not to get used to them. He nodded meekly and returned to his book.

“Technoblade, um, let me vocalize? A-and, sleep in the same bed as him,” he tried to continue, fingers brushing gently over the note he’d made. *he is warm*. And it was true, still, even now, Ranboo was wrapped up in blankets and sat between the two and still, Technoblade radiated warmth like a personal beacon. “He told me to ‘eat whatever’ and gave me the instruction book—”

“Instruction book?” Philza asked.

“See, you’re interrupting more than me,” Technoblade ribbed lightly, and Ranboo pulled the instruction book out of his inventory.

“It, um, it’s, a second book? That I use to remember *how* to do things, instead of just, um,” Ranboo nervously pushed at one of his bangs. How to concisely indicate the *everything* about his garbage brain and how the memory book effectively *was* his brain at this point?

He handed the instruction book over to Philza, who flipped it open briefly, seemingly skimmed no more than a page, then handed it back to Ranboo. He pocketed it gratefully. Even if the instruction book was... impersonal, really, the idea of other people reading *his* books, even the less important one, made him anxious.

His stomach twisted at the next highlight, bad memories of the first lemon panic resurfacing. “Technoblade, um,” he hesitated, “I—I’m not, sure? There was, a lot going on, but, um, he, you—” Ranboo cringed around the memory book and peeked at Technoblade from underneath his bangs. Technoblade inclined his head, face once again mostly-hidden by the mask and strong arms around Ranboo’s thin waist. It bolstered him enough for a deep breath and, “You were, g-going to throw me out, at one point?”

“No,” Technoblade said immediately, pulling Ranboo into a hug that Ranboo gratefully curled into. “No, shhhh. I said you could live in the nearby village, *if* you wanted to, before I had a clearer understanding of the situation. You were never in danger of getting kicked out.”

“Oh,” Ranboo murmured against Technoblade’s shoulder. “Oh, because, because you thought I was free,” he said absently, stringing those pieces together.

“You *are* free, have been the whole time,” Technoblade said firmly, making Ranboo’s tail curl and twitch, his shoulders hunch. Right. Right. Just because he didn’t like it, didn’t mean he could say things like that. Time to suck it up and get used to it.

Ranboo took a deep breath and brought his memory book up so he could read it without moving from Technoblade’s chest.

“Then, um, Technoblade went to go get Philza, and I was alone for a little while? And, I visited the village nearby, and cleaned myself off, which hurt my hands, and went mining, and I used the emeralds I got while I was mining to buy Ranmoo!” His heart squeezed with pride at that, still, to know he’d accomplished that on his own, that he’d *earned* Ranmoo.

He perked up suddenly, sitting up straighter, and startled the men he was sitting with, Technoblade jumping and Philza's wing poofing out impressively. "Wait. Wait, if, if I'm—" he swallowed around the word, "—*free*, does, does that, make Ranboo mine? A-all the way?"

He looked between his—people, as they shared a brief look.

"Yeah, mate," Philza said slowly, brow furrowed.

"Did you think she was mine?" Technoblade asked, sounding incredulous.

"Uhm, yes?"

"Heh!?"

"I, I thought," Ranboo pressed his face to Technoblade's shoulder once again, hiding, tuft of his tail brushing against the back of his hand as he drummed nervous fingers against the cover of his memory book. "I thought, that you owned me. Which means. Meant. That you, would, that I wouldn't—" Ranboo bit his lip. "A, a slave doesn't. *Own* anything, ourselves, everything is a gift from our owners a-and gifts can be taken back."

"Not how gifts work, and that's fucked up," Philza stated, Ranboo's ear cocking out in his direction.

"Um?"

They waited for him.

"Um, how... how *do* gifts, work?" Ranboo asked, confused. He didn't know what Philza meant. He also thought everything he said was normal, but if Philza said it was fucked up, then Ranboo guessed he believed him.

"Once something is gifted to you, it's *yours*. They can't just take it back because it no longer suits them, that's not what a *gift* is," Technoblade explained, sounding fairly offended. Ranboo cringed, but Technoblade's arms were still around him, hands warm and heavy and fussing with his hair and blankets. Ranboo looked down. He. Probably had never had a gift before, then. Not before here, not before Technoblade. "And also, what's yours is *yours*. 'Gift from your owner' is just demoralizing garbage they fed you to keep you in line."

"Techno's a big fan of owning things," Philza joked, and Ranboo appreciated the effort to lighten the mood. Everything felt so intolerably serious and heavy and he was *already exhausted*.

"Look, I just like physical possessions okay? I enjoy stuff. I have a passion for personal property, if you will."

"I know," Philza said with a warm chuckle, reaching around Ranboo to flick at the emerald earring dangling from Technoblade's left ear. Actually, sandwiched between the two of them like he was, Ranboo's brain made the belated connection that they were both wearing a matching earring to each other, Philza's in his right ear. That seemed—sweet.

Philza's clever fingers moved through Ranboo's hair, gently tugging out tangles and straightening the bicolored locks. "So you got Ranmoo," Philza prompted, returning them to their task. Ranboo nodded, focusing on his memory book again.

“Then, uh, you got here, a-and you were. Um. Very bloody.”

Philza and Technoblade both snorted. “Yeahhhh, we were,” Philza agreed, sounding slightly chagrined.

“You, Philza, um, said that you wouldn’t hurt me,” Ranboo said, faint memories of hands in his hair and a conspiratory wink sent his way as he read the words. “And you didn’t, ask to read my memory book when you, uh, found out about it. Or, maybe you already knew?”

“Techno had mentioned it yeah,” Philza confirmed, and Ranboo nodded minutely. That made sense. “Were you expecting me to want to read it?”

Ranboo shrugged uncomfortably. “People usually do.”

“Bruuuh.”

Ranboo winced.

“Not you,” Philza and Technoblade both assured, hands moving gently on him, and he bit his lip and nodded again. Baby. Pansy. Cowardly little mess. Honestly, he probably *was* doing it for attention at this point, making them comfort him so often, and who did he think he was? God.

“Just that, it seems rude as shit. That’s your memory book; I wouldn’t want anyone reading through my memories.”

“Oh god, yeah,” Technoblade agreed, “I hadn’t even looked at it that way.”

“Techno.”

“I was just like, ‘that’s his he’ll share if he wants,’ I didn’t think about people rifling through *my* memories!”

Philza laughed, the wing draped over them shaking as his shoulders did. “You’re a wreck, you know that mate?”

“I think we’ve already well-established that; we don’t need the constant rehashing thanks.” Philza laughed again but Technoblade winced, noticeable only because Ranboo was curled up against him, and shook his head as though to dislodge something. Ranboo frowned in concern.

“Seriously though, Ranboo, you’re entitled to your own privacy,” Philza said, recapturing his attention. Ranboo pressed his lips together and let out a little “hmmm” followed by an “ah.” He burrowed in against Technoblade further, tail waving and twitching and occasionally bapping against Philza’s wing, but Philza didn’t even seem to notice.

“Thank you,” he said belatedly, quietly, *meaning* it. Privacy—he was grateful. He didn’t know what to *do* with all the kindness these two showed him.

Speaking of, the next notable point in his memories happened to be, “You uh, gave me golden carrots, once? And I, uh, kind of freaked out about it, and, you held me to calm me down.” A chair, a fire, the texture of Technoblade’s furred cape. Good memories, kind memories, the type he liked reviving.

“Yeah,” Technoblade confirmed, broad palm on Ranboo’s back.

“Can you remember *why* you freaked out about it?” Philza prompted, and Ranboo nodded.

“Too good for the likes of me.”

Beneath him, Technoblade sighed, and Philza’s lips pressed thin. “That’s what I was afraid you’d say.”

“It isn’t—I’m not—you shouldn’t waste your—”

“It’s not a waste,” Technoblade interrupted, Ranboo squirming so he held his book open one handed and his other twisted anxious fingers through his tail fluff. “Carrots are meant to be eaten. You need to eat. I have a *lot* of them and I’m not saving them for any kind of occasion. It’s not a waste.” Technoblade’s nose nudged against Ranboo’s hair. “Maybe don’t eat my gapples,” and Ranboo flinched at the very idea, “but the carrots have good saturation and you need to put on weight and *also*, fundamentally, you are entitled to food.”

Ranboo’s lip wobbled. He drew his legs in close, hands to his eyes, and even though he was freakishly tall and too-long and too-lanky, with the angle he was leaned at and Philza’s wing covering them and his body tightly curled he almost felt small. Hidden. “Thank you,” he said wetly, two dots of pain burning at his palms and eyes. “Thank you. For, for the food, and the communicator, and the inventory, and the book, and the bed, and clothes, and for not hitting me, and for being so patient, and *everything*.”

“Shhhh,” they both hushed.

Ranboo quieted slowly. They did not rush him.

“Okay,” Philza said, straightening and flattening Ranboo’s hair while Technoblade rubbed up and down his back. “Okay, I think Techno and I have the idea. At least a better one, enough that we can watch for pitfalls moving forward. You were just continuing on with life as normal, where your situation was better because of who you were ‘owned by,’ not because of your status as a free person.”

Ranboo nodded.

“For our part, the way we understand it is this: Techno nabbed you on his way out with the intention of rescuin’ you, brought you here with the assumption you had nowhere else to go, and had you help around the place because you live here, and that means pulling your weight, free people included.”

Ranboo... guessed that made sense, yeah.

“I needed you to watch Carl,” Technoblade said, “Which didn’t seem like *too* much of a favor to ask, given everything, but afterwards you could’ve gone and lived in the village nearby if you wanted. Since I’m uhhhhhhh. Not great with the whole social skills thing.”

Philza chuckled. “You really aren’t.”

“I got Phil, you two seemed friendly with each other?”

“I thought you knew you were free and I’ve just been treating you like a skittish housemate,” Philza said, then sighed. “That was my oversight.”

Technoblade's lips thinned, and Ranboo looked back and forth between them. They. They *had*. They'd been treating him like anyone else, just, an *ex*-slave... It was so weird, Ranboo couldn't? He couldn't? Conceptualize it? Not properly, anyway.

"When we gave you chores or asked you to help out..." Technoblade said slowly, Ranboo's attention settling entirely on him. "Did you... think that, if you said no, something bad would happen to you?"

Ranboo bit his lip. Even now, exhausted and wrapped in their weight and warmth, the idea of reaching the ends of their patience curled sour within him. He nodded.

"What did you think would happen?" Technoblade prompted, and oh boy Ranboo just had so *many* scenarios in his head for *that*!

"You'd get upset with me," Ranboo said, voice small and shoulders hunched. "You'd stop being patient and—and you'd realize you don't have to treat me so nicely. You—" a hundred different thoughts all clamored for first place, endless possibilities ricocheting through his skull, it was just a matter of what got said first, "—you could stop feeding me so much all the time, make me sleep on the floor or out in the stable, stop letting me drink, take Ranmoo away, collar me again and hit me, o-or whip me, splash water on me, yell at me about how stupid and annoying I am and I'd *deserve it*—"

"You would *not*!" Technoblade said vehemently, halfway to a shout, and Ranboo shut his mouth with an audible click of his fangs against one another and cringed. No hurt came.

"You really think we'd do that?" Technoblade asked, quiet, smaller than Ranboo had ever heard the man, soft fingers brushing against Ranboo's cheek. He leaned into the touch.

"Mmmng." Ranboo cupped Technoblade's hand with his own and rubbed his face against his palm, then rubbed a little harder, thoughts latching onto the shhhshhhshhh of skin brushing skin, the hard calluses on his fingers from swords and pickaxes and tridents, the roughness, the heat that radiated off him as steady and sure as the dawn.

But he'd been asked a question. He needed to stop being *weird* and answer it.

"You haven't," he hedged, and even without checking his memory book, he knew that much was right. They had never hurt him. And if they had thought—if they'd freed him, then that made more sense, that they hadn't. They weren't treating him like a slave because to them—and to everybody, now, he guessed—he *wasn't* one. "I—you're kind to me."

He wasn't saying it right. He needed to say it right. "I—" he started right as Philza said "Ranboo —"

They both cut off, Ranboo wincing at the accident, but Philza squeezed gently at the base of his neck and prompted, "Go ahead."

Ranboo took a deep, shaky breath. "I think you're good people. You've been... *so* good to me. But, but I'm also scared, of, I—I'm *really* good at getting on people's *last* nerve."

"That doesn't mean we'd ever hurt you," Technoblade said, "Even if you were as intentionally irritating as possible, all on purpose, we won't *hit you or starve you, god*."

And the weirdest thing was, as Technoblade firmly wrapped Ranboo back into a hug and Ranboo clung to his arm, some part of Ranboo actually believed that.

Philza's hand rested on Ranboo's forearm, thumb stroking slowly, his face pinched and lost in thought. For a long moment, no one said anything.

Philza sighed.

"Ranboo, you're... you are in need of more help than I think either of us initially assumed."

"Sorry," he said automatically, alarm bells going off in his head. What did that mean? Ranboo knew what it meant but what did it mean?

Philza ran a hand over his face.

"Okay. Neither of you are going to like this." Ranboo bit his lip, fang nearly digging hard enough to bleed. "And Ranboo, I would like to preface this by saying you're not in trouble, no one is angry with you, no one's going to do you any harm, and nothing is decided yet. But." Philza looked at Technoblade. "Are we sure we're the ones who should be doing this?"

Ranboo's blood ran cold, in a way that the blankets and wing and warm body he was pressed against couldn't touch. "What?" he gasped softly, Technoblade's arms the only things that kept him from shattering into a million little pieces.

"Easy," Technoblade said, thoughtful, distracted. Ranboo looked up at him, back at Philza, back to Technoblade, his hands grasping at his arm and body shaking like a leaf. "Easy, it's okay. But," Technoblade's lips pressed thin like he'd tasted something sour. He then sighed. "It's a valid question."

"I, no, please—I, please, what—please, no, I—"

"Ranboo, Ranboo," Philza cupped Ranboo's face and forced him to turn, Ranboo trembling and staring with faraway eyes at Philza's chin. "Ranboo listen to me. We haven't decided anything. Nothing is decided until we're all the way finished talking, and that might not even be tonight. No one's upset with you. But we need to talk about it."

"I—" I don't want to, I don't have anywhere else to go, I've grown attached to both of you, I don't want to leave behind the life I've started making here, I don't want to forget this, "you—please, you're the kindest people I've ever met!"

"That speaks more to how bad the other people you knew were, than anything," Technoblade said, breath making Ranboo's hair feel tingly and nervy.

"Ranboo," Philza said as Ranboo tried (mostly unsuccessfully) to keep his breath from spiraling out of control, "This is kind of what I meant. You're freaking out again."

"I'm sorry!"

"Shhhh," Philza hushed, strong, worn fingers brushing hair from Ranboo's face. "Ranboo, all we're doing is talking. Earlier, you got into a panic over me bein' brusque. And that's the thing." Philza shared a helpless look with Technoblade. "Techno and I aren't saints. We're not going to hurt you, but we are violent people, for all I'd say we're pretty friendly. I'm going to yell, I yell all

the time, Techno gets frustrated and moody, we're going to snap at you. And you've got a hairtrigger response, kid, it's not sustainable if you're going to have a meltdown every time one of us raises our voice at you, especially if you're still stuck thinking we might hurt you."

Panicky, annoying, stupid, worthless, over-emotional piece of shit, Ranboo knew he wasn't worthwhile he'd known from the very start, he'd let himself get complacent, been reliant, freaked out too much, too often, it was his worst quality, and now he was going to lose the best thing that'd ever happened to him because he couldn't handle a little yelling.

"So talk to us," Philza finished more firmly, "Nothing's set in stone but we need to figure this out."

Right then, Ranboo felt like if he opened his mouth, all that'd come out would be a sob.

He pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes and forced as deep a breath as he could, shaky and taut like a wire. His mind was a scrambled mess of exhausted fear—and he wished, briefly, bitterly, that Philza hadn't decided to have this conversation on the heels of the worst freakout he'd had in... it, it felt like a long time. He guessed he had no way to be sure.

He said the only thing he had to offer. "I don't want to go."

"We know," Technoblade said, then pulled and resituated Ranboo so his face was once again pressed to the fur of his cape. Ranboo let his memory book fall off his lap to the floor, pages rustling and some of them probably crumpled, for all he cared. He wrapped his long arms around Technoblade's shoulders and bit down on a sob, clinging to him like a lifeline.

Maybe Technoblade would take his side? Maybe, maybe Ranboo had garnered just. Just the smallest amount of fondness, from this man? And, and he would want to keep him, despite all the trouble that made Ranboo not worth the effort?

A familiar hand pet at the back of Ranboo's head, then squeezed gently at the base of his neck, Technoblade's mouth pressed to Ranboo's hair and one of the fangs of his skull mask scraped lightly against Ranboo's scalp. "Phil's making points, you know." What little hope Ranboo had left snapped, and he couldn't stop the keen that ripped its way out of his throat.

So that was that, then.

Timidly, he asked, "Who—?" in a high and cracking voice, sounding far too childlike.

"That's the million emerald question," Technoblade said heavily, one hand lifting from Ranboo's back to tug gently at a loose feather, then returning to rub long, slow strokes down Ranboo's spine.

"The good Captain has history with therapy," Philza mused.

"The good Captain is in a boat halfway across the world right now."

"Shit, right."

"Her son seems emotionally well adjusted," Technoblade offered, and resigned hopelessness settled in Ranboo's throat and chest and gut to hear Technoblade making suggestions.

"He also has an infant."

Technoblade shrugged.

"Niki's got her own problems," Philza said, "Will's about as sensitive as I am."

"Ehhh."

"Okay, maybe worse."

"I'd say most definitely worse."

Philza chuckled. "He's a good kid." His hand joined Technoblade's on Ranboo's blanketed back and the touch brought so much comfort even though the man's words brought so much fear. Ranboo felt strung out, pulled apart in two different directions so all his insides were scattered across the middle ground like spilled beads.

It was like something had splashed water across his person and he was too weak and trapped to get somewhere dry. He twisted his fingers into the fur a little tighter and his breath hitched, quiet tears falling into Technoblade's cape that he was just too tired to try to stop. Tired, he was so tired, all of his exhaustion pinning him down, like weights hanging off every joint, no fear or adrenaline leftover was strong enough to stave it off. Just a heavy hopelessness like an anchor chained to his heart, and the fatigue through all his bones.

"Sam's got a level head," Technoblade said thoughtfully, shifting on the couch ever so slightly. Almost like he was rocking Ranboo. Almost.

"Workaholic. Eret maybe?"

Technoblade considered that. "Eret maybe. I don't know them all that well."

Ranboo felt numbness start to fade through him. Was that it then?

"I don't think we know too many other people," Philza mused.

"Skeppy's got a gang he's roving around with, but I don't think they're really ehheh. Options," Technoblade said with a chuckle.

"God. When's the last time you two even spoke?"

Another shrug.

Philza huffed. "So, our only options are someone halfway across the globe, and a guy we don't even particularly know that well."

Ranboo's ear twitched. He stomped down on the flicker of hope that threatened to ignite. Hope hurt and he should know better than to have any.

"And I know you're not keen on leaving," Philza said gentler, squeezing at Ranboo's shoulder.

"Please..." he begged, a choked whisper.

Again, Technoblade shifted, a soothing little rocking motion.

"I can't help but feel like you're taking this as a 'we're kicking you out' and not a 'we're having a discussion you are a part of.' Like that's just the vibe I'm getting."

Ranboo couldn't muster a response. Just flexed his fingers in the furred neckline, shoulders hitching.

"Ranboo," Technoblade prompted, moving to push Ranboo away but he (disobediently, defiantly, wretched good-for-nothing whelp) clung tighter. There was a moment, and then Technoblade's arms resettled around him, anchoring him, his only tether to the present reality. "Talk to us. Do you think we're the right people to help you?"

"Yes!" Ranboo cried.

"Even though this keeps happening?" Philza asked, feathers on his wing briefly fluffing with his words.

"They—less, than they ever have," Ranboo gasped, trying to find it in him to speak, the strength to summon words, to explain himself, to maybe make his masters understand—make, make these people, understand. He squeezed his arms around Technoblade, taking his reassurance in the solidity of him, in the broad and heavy strength of him. "This used to happen, so much. I panicked so often. And I—I know, it's annoying, and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but—" Ranboo choked on air, open mouthed as a shudder passed through him, body curling.

"I, I'm remembering things now..." he offered pathetically.

He wished he could explain, actually explain, what that meant. But even he didn't know, fully. Why he could remember sleeping curled up on the ground floor with Technoblade, why he could remember Ranmoo and Carl and Max and Twitch and Enderchest, why he could remember building fences and sowing wheat and what it meant that he could remember these things, when his life before was a murky haze of nothingness.

"I, I know it's a bother, but my panics are—less, fewer, a-and less intense. I—I can do better, I promise, I swear just—"

Just what? Ranboo had nothing to offer. And even as he said the words, he knew he wouldn't be able to make good on his promise. He never had before. He always tried and he always, always failed.

"It's... not that you're being a bother," Technoblade said slowly, thumb stroking in idle motions, "I mean, I wouldn't say you panicking is fun and enjoyable or anything, I mean that's just a given," he said, faster and nasal, waving a hand, "but it's not that you're a bother. It's that Phil and I keep stepping in pitfalls and you're the one who takes the fallout for that. So if we talk to Eret and if they're open to it and if it seems like you might have an easier time there, and they could help you in ways we can't," Technoblade paused, "shouldn't we treat that as an option?"

No, they shouldn't, they should all collectively forget this conversation ever happened and never bring it up again. Ranboo could forget it so fast, it'd be the easiest thing in the world.

"Help me with what?" Ranboo asked, voice small. Maybe, if he could make himself perfect, if he could just do what they wanted, be what they wanted, if he knew what they wanted...

"Recovering from everything that happened to you," Technoblade said, "figuring out how to be a free person. Adjusting."

That word again. Free. The thing that had started this whole mess. Ranboo wished—no, no, he wasn't allowed to have wants, slaves weren't—but. He wasn't a slave. Free people had wants. Free people—voiced, their wants. And. And could have them, sometimes.

Ranboo opened his mouth.

They wanted him to act like a free person. They wanted him to figure out how to be a free person. If that was what they wanted, what it would take for him to stay, he could pretend—not pretend. It wouldn't be pretending if he was actually free. He could. He could act like it. He would. There was no other option.

"I want to stay," he said, as forcefully as he could manage (which, admittedly, wasn't very forceful). "I don't want to leave. I don't want to go to a new place with a new stranger and start all over again. I don't want to forget this, I don't want to start forgetting again. Please," he summoned the final dregs of his courage, "I want to stay here with you."

There was half a moment, a blissful half-second, when he'd said the words that he felt proud, relieved, even. Then his gut cramped so hard he bit down on bile, body wound too tight to even tremble, stock still as he waited for their judgement.

So much of his body expected pain to blossom across his skin. These men could shatter his bones, easily, if they wanted to. It wouldn't even be a challenge.

But Technoblade let loose a rush of air, sinking into the couch, and Philza chuckled quietly, almost rueful.

"Yeah? You feel that strongly about it?"

"Yes," he said, voice small and meek and tremulous again, his bravery spent.

He felt Philza's fingers carefully shifting through his hair again, pinching small clumps lightly and tugging them down, flattening them out. He waited for his verdict.

"Ranboo," even his flinch was subdued, exhausted, wrung out, "What do you need, moving forward? What can we do that would help you the most?"

Ranboo's mind searched sluggishly for an answer, the ever present holes exacerbated by Ranboo's fatigue and the truly unexpected, unthinkable situation he now found himself trapped in. Ha, trapped in freedom. That was almost funny. But it wasn't an answer, and Philza wanted one, and Ranboo just wanted to lie down and sleep for a year and for them to keep touching him kindly, to not move from the couch where he was blanketed and held and hidden behind Philza's massive wing.

So he asked for, "Time." He swallowed, tried to elaborate. "Just, time, please. I can learn. I'll—write things down. I just—I know, you've been patient with me, just," even though he wasn't moving, he felt dizzy. Whether that was from exhaustion or because his sinuses were all stuffed up from crying and it made his head all pressurized and weird, he didn't know. "Please, a little more of your patience."

"Okay."

"We can do that," Technoblade agreed.

The flicker of hope caught Ranboo off guard as much as their words did. Okay? Just like that? After this whole conversation, they were just—

“Okay?” Ranboo asked, pulling his face from Technoblade’s cape for the first time since Technoblade had pulled him in.

“And you’re just,” Technoblade bobbed his head to the side, “acceptin’ the fact that Phil and I are gonna keep making mistakes and also that we’re not always going to be able to think things through before we yell or gripe or say something stupid?”

Ranboo nodded, yes, of course, that was their right, he’d accept anything, anything, any treatment if it meant not being sent away.

“And I am gonna insist,” Philza said, Ranboo turning to look at him with cautious, timid, wavering hope, “that once her voyage is over and she gets back in range, we have a long phone call with Captain Puffy and we pay her a visit in short order.”

“That’s reasonable,” Technoblade said, and Ranboo nodded along. Yes, anything. He could talk to people. Well, not really, he couldn’t talk to people well, but he would try! He’d give it his all, anything, he’d agree to anything.

“Okay then,” Philza said with a deep sigh, looking tired. Ranboo could sympathize.

“...Is running out into the woods going to be a thing now?” Technoblade asked, sounding non-judgemental, just curious.

Ranboo shook his head. “I’ve never done that before.” Distantly, if he wasn’t so tired and frayed out to the very ends of his shattered nerves, he would still be shocked with himself for having run at all.

“Was sending Twitch after you okay?” Philza asked. From their spot by the fireplace, Twitch cawed.

“Yes, thank you,” Ranboo said. “They were—it was nice, once I realized they were there. I appreciated it.”

“Nice!” Twitch agreed, shuffle-stepping.

“Were you a good bird?” Philza chuckled affectionately.

“Good bird!” Twitch fluttered over, Philza easily reaching out and catching them on his wrist. “Good boy! Good boy!” Twitch bobbed out low and Philza moved his arm so that Twitch could peck and then preen at Ranboo’s hair, Ranboo chuckling weakly.

“Yeah, Ranboo’s a good kid,” Philza agreed, his voice sounding heavy. Ranboo’s everything felt heavy, but nevertheless his weary tail thumped twice before resuming its limp and boneless flopping.

For a moment, the three were silent. Then Technoblade was moving, righting his posture and taking Ranboo with him. He bent and scooped Ranboo’s book off the floor, placing it in his mismatched hands. “Write this down. I have to groom Carl. I’ll stable Ranmoo while I’m out.” Ranboo had half

a mind to protest that he could do it but Technoblade kept talking and Ranboo wouldn't interrupt. "Then we are all going to sleep."

Philza hummed in agreement, his wing pulled back to let Technoblade up, and Ranboo took his pen in unsteady claws. The firelight was bright enough to see by, but his foggy head and unsteady hand, still shaking even hours after the actual panic attack, weren't super conducive to writing.

For a long, long stretch of minutes, the only sounds were the fireplace crackling, the scratch of Ranboo's pen on paper, and Twitch occasionally chirping words and half-sentences as Philza brushed slow fingers over their feathers. His eyes were closed, head leaned back on the couch. His inattention made Ranboo's hands shake just a little less.

Once he'd recorded everything he could remember, every detail he could think of, Ranboo closed his book and settled it into his inventory with an unsteady exhale. Philza's hand touched his cheek and he blinked, startled but too wrung out to jump at the unexpected touch. The man's eyes slipped open, attention heavy and focused on Ranboo.

"You know I don't want you to leave," he half-said, half-asked. Ranboo turned his face into the touch, and Philza cupped his jaw. "I care about you, and I like having you here. I just... want to do right by you, Ranboo. Even if that means admitting that Techno and I aren't the best options."

"You are," Ranboo said quietly, his heavy body curling in towards Philza's much smaller, deadlier one. He reached out, brazen and over-bold, and placed his hands on Philza's arms, his face on his shoulder. He felt Twitch beak him from where they still perched on Philza's wrist.

"The two of you are the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Philza's birdless hand squeezed gently at the base of Ranboo's neck, turning so his lips pressed against Ranboo's hair.

"I think you've just had shit luck with people, mate."

"I think you should give yourselves more credit."

It was obstinate, argumentative, the sort of thing he never would have dared to think about saying however many weeks ago. But even without the whole mess regarding the idea of him being free or not (no "or not." He was free. Time to suck it up and get used to it), it felt like the right thing to say.

Twitch clicked twice and let out a long, "Awwwww! Dadza!"

Philza laughed, Ranboo feeling it at every place their bodies touched, and he smiled as well. Another wave of vertigo hit him, and he wondered if he could just... fall asleep right there. He wanted to. He had the blankets and everything.

The door opened to Technoblade with Max at his heels, who darted in and sniffed enthusiastically at Ranboo, then Philza, then only briefly at Twitch who poofed up and flapped twice at him.

"Oh, shit, yeah, we forgot him on the ground floor," Philza remarked mildly, making no indication that he had any intention of moving from where he held both Ranboo and Twitch.

"We were preoccupied."

And honestly, Ranboo was happy to have his slumber buddy present, because he was just about ready to pass out on his feet, except—

Free people were allowed to have wants. Free people were allowed to ask for things. He was free. More importantly, he was going to act like he was free so they wouldn't change their minds about keeping him and his broken brain.

“Um,” he made himself say, drawing their attention right back onto him, where it had been all day, “May I—” and his mouth was open, it was just words, he could say them, he could ask, he'd started he couldn't chicken out now, he wanted it he was allowed to want, use your words use your words use your fucking words why couldn't his brain and mouth work together for once in his life—

“Ranboo?” Philza prompted.

“May I sleep in your bed tonight?” Small, quiet, squeaky, barely audible, really. But he'd said it. He'd asked. His already taxed energy reserves felt the herculean effort for what it was, even if the results were meek and unimpressive, but he'd asked.

“Ahhhyup,” Technoblade answered, hooves silent on the wood once again as he hung up his coat and started to scale the ladder, Philza rising from the couch and Ranboo close on his heels.

Yes.

Philza had Ranboo climb first, which was—probably smart. Ranboo's arms were shaking just from scaling that one floor, his balance unsteady, it was a miracle he didn't fall.

His sluggish fingers fumbled twice with the simple fastens of his clothes, and then he was in his nightshirt and baggy sleep pants and Technoblade was nudging him towards the beds. He'd pushed them together; Technoblade's bed was just large enough for him and one other, smaller person, so Ranboo's bed was there to augment.

He climbed in under the covers. Philza slipped in behind him, wing stretching out once again to blanket them, a comforting weight, and Technoblade was only a moment behind him, warm and solid and draping an arm over Ranboo, then hugging him, and he remembered, he remembered! He remembered, this was like the first night, but with Philza here this time, and he hoped that, like that first time, he would be able to remember this, too. That some piece of this would make it into longterm. That he could cherish this bright and shining moment that'd come at the end of a long and miserable day.

He was held, warm, safe, ~~wanted~~, in the place he'd so jealousy envied ever since Philza had first made it back.

It was a shame he was asleep before he could really appreciate it fully, out like a light while two men chuckled fondly to see him slump.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to absolutely everyone who leaves comments (and those of you who leave lil snippets in your bookmarks. I see you. I love you). This is the most feedback I've EVER gotten on a fic

and I cannot express enough how much joy it gives me <3

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Alright part three of what was originally meant to be one chapter oTL

For those of you who enjoy crafts (and Technoblade, though if you're here I feel that's a given) I have made [a Technoblade doll!](#) Go take a peak <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo woke with his pulse in his temples and a *headache* that made his whole skull feel like an over-heavy stone. He was also shivering, but so hot he almost (only almost) wanted to kick the blanket off. And for all he'd just woken up, he still felt exhausted enough to go right back to sleep.

Noooo. *No*. He couldn't be sick.

“Ranboo?”

His brain was—sluggish. Moving too slow. Technoblade and Philza were up, moving, there was a hand brushing his hair back, the inside of someone's wrist pressed to his forehead.

“Fever,” Philza said quietly, “Probably sick from stress and bein' out in the snow all yesterday.”

Ranboo whined, his ears pinned back. His body ached.

“M sorry,” he whimpered, rolling onto his elbows and pushing himself up with creaky bones, head hanging and pulsing angrily with him for the movement. “I can, I can—”

“You can stay right where you are,” Philza said firmly, sliding a hand under his chest and pressing the other to his shoulder to physically turn him onto his back and replace him on the mattress, a hand cupping the side of his head to make sure he was pressed into the pillow.

Pathetically, childishly, he whined.

“Easy does it. You're sick; you're staying put.”

“Yessir,” he whispered, and noted the way Philza's breath caught in his throat before he slowly let it out.

“Do you still have milk in your inventory?” Technoblade asked, and Ranboo gave the bucket to him. Wait.

“Ranmoo,” he said, trying to get up again. Two sets of hands pushed him back down that time.

“I'll handle her in a minute,” Technoblade said, “You stay here and listen to Philza.”

“And you thought adding a loo to the top floor was more trouble than it’d be worth,” Philza teased him, earning a snort from Technoblade.

Ranboo whined in the back of his throat when Technoblade descended the ladder, needy and clingy and all the things he shouldn’t be, but he wanted Technoblade to stay. Even if that was counterproductive. Because they’d just discussed how he needed to take care of Ranmoo.

“Easy does it,” Philza repeated, petting at his face. He curled the blankets closer around his shoulders, even though his face felt hot enough to melt ice (bad metaphor, scary metaphor, bad idea, his cheeks still burned from yesterday). “How’re you feeling?”

“Bad,” Ranboo admitted, “Everything *aches*.”

“Mmm,” Philza hummed sympathetically, settling himself onto the mattress and petting his hair. “Head all stuffed up?”

Ranboo whimpered and nodded.

“Yeah, you’ve just got a cold, Ranboo. You’ll sleep it off and feel better tomorrow.”

Ranboo let out an Ender vocalization, warbly and high pitched, Philza’s hand feeling mercifully cool against his forehead.

Technoblade returned just a few minutes later, pulling a cup from his inventory once he was off the ladder. Philza helped Ranboo sit up, propped against the wall and comedically tall sat next to the petite man, even though Ranboo was profoundly slouched and Philza was more or less upright.

“Here,” Technoblade said gently, waiting to let go until Ranboo had it securely in both his hands. He peered at the faintly steaming milk, a warmth that had nothing to do with his fever swelling in his chest. Gratitude, adoration for his ma—his Technoblade and Philza. Hhhng. *Don’t think about it.*

He sipped the warm milk and his ears twitched as he tasted honey. Too good for him, but—he resolved not to care. The honeyed milk tasted good and was soothing on his throat and settled warmth into his belly and Technoblade had given it to him and now his hand was on Ranboo’s forehead, not as cool as Philza’s but still a welcome touch.

“You’re burning up,” Technoblade said worriedly.

“Yeah, can’t use washcloths to help either,” Philza mused. “Twitch and I will stick with him. See if you can’t get any Nether wart and gold nuggets today? The melons are ready enough for harvest.”

“Probably some Ghast tears while I’m there,” Technoblade agreed, “Ranboo, you feel nauseous at all?”

Ranboo shook his head, except that was a bad idea, headache, ow, “Just achey, sir.”

“So, do you *remember* that you can just call us by our names?” Philza asked with a furrowed brow. Oh hey, maybe Ranboo *did* feel nauseous! Oh boy!

“Um.”

“Write it down in your memory book after you’re done with the milk, then go to sleep,” Technoblade instructed, dressing for the day. “I’ve got Ranmoo, Carl, then the Nether,” he said, and Ranboo could just hear him ticking off his mental checklist. Ranboo did the same thing, but only when he was alone and no one could hear him talking to himself.

“I’ll have my communicator on,” Philza said simply.

“Birdseed!” Twitch demanded.

“Go find some carrion like a normal fuckin’ crow,” Philza chided, setting a bowl of birdseed on the windowsill. Twitch ignored his demand and immediately let into the food. Ranboo and Philza both blinked twice as Technoblade handed Philza the bowl of crushed cactus.

“Before I forget,” he said, and also pulled bread and fruit from his inventory that went immediately into Philza’s. Then he was gone, and Ranboo missed him, so he sipped the honeyed milk, and he didn’t miss him as much.

“...sorry,” he said, aching and exhausted and stuffy, “I’m in your bed.”

“Eh, not like Techno or I have never dealt with germs before,” Philza said with an airy shrug, Twitch tilting their head back to swallow the seed and bobbing back down next to him, looking like neither much cared where they were or what they were doing. “My son didn’t have the strongest constitution when he was little—or in general—so he used to get sick all the time.” Philza sounded almost nostalgic. “He’s all grown now, ‘s been something of an empty nest for a while.”

Ranboo wasn’t entirely sure his addled brain was following along precisely as he was meant to, but Philza also didn’t seem to want a response. He had a faraway look, and then he chuckled.

“He always wanted me to read the strangest stories to him. Political dramas, historical fiction, things no nine year old should rightfully have any interest in.”

“Oh,” Ranboo said quietly, distracted from his headache and sore joints for a moment by Philza’s pleasant voice, by the soft mental image of him with a small child curled in bed and asking for stories twice his reading level. “Did you? Read them.”

“Of course,” Philza laughed, “He was the smartest kid in the world, and I’m not just saying that because I’m his father. Who was I to tell him no? Books are meant to be read.”

Ranboo smiled, drinking more of the milk.

“Techno was better with the books than I was, the two of them would talk circles around me, even back when Will was still figuring words out. I remember—” Philza broke off into a little giggle, “—we spent like a month where every evening Will would *demand* Techno read him more of the Art of War.” Philza let loose an airy little string of laughs, Ranboo’s tail tip twitching underneath the blanket at the sound. “He got so upset when the book was over. Techno consoled him by starting him in on King fucking Lear.”

Ranboo didn’t know what that was, but Philza’s laugh was contagious, and it hurt to laugh but it made him feel strangely lighter, too. Before he knew it, the cup in his hands was empty.

The door downstairs opened and shut, Max’s paws clicking against the wood, and Ranboo heard the stove switch on. Then his own communicator sparked red, and Technoblade’s voice came in

clear through the group feature even as the door opened and shut once again.

“I’m leaving the milk on the stove, Phil, check it in like half an hour?”

“Can do.”

Philza took the empty cup from Ranboo’s hands and reminded him to write in his memory book that he didn’t have to call anyone sir. Ranboo, uh, did *not* want to do that.

But he was free now, and he needed to *act* free. Didn’t free people call each other sir sometimes? Ranboo felt like this was a little much to ask of him. But it wasn’t his decision. Except, if he was free, maybe it *could* be his decision?

His brain hurt too much for this. He would be obedient because that was what was easy and didn’t mean thinking with a headache.

slept in bed with Technoblade and Philza, woke up sick, Philza says not to call them “sir” anymore

Ranboo glowered unhappily at the book. He wanted to erase that last bit.

He wanted to lay down and go back to sleep more, and let Philza help settle him.

“Are you hungry?”

“No s—Philza.”

“Would you like me to put more aloe on your burns?”

“Yes please.”

Ranboo felt—younger, than he actually was. He was always childish, he knew that much, stupid and slow and pathetic, but in his—people’s—bed, having been given milk and with Philza gently rubbing balm into his burns, he felt... tended to. Small. Young. It was all too easy to imagine Philza and Technoblade acting like this with Philza’s son—Will? Was that the name?

“Oh,” Ranboo gasped, taking his book back out and awkwardly writing sideways. *Philza has a son named Will(?)*

“Um, what, what’s your son’s name?” Ranboo asked hesitantly.

“Wilbur,” Philza said, warmth in his tone that made Ranboo shiver.

named ~~Will(?)~~ Wilbur

He put his memory book away and tucked himself tightly under the covers, leaning into Philza’s cool hand.

“Go back to sleep,” he ordered gently. Ranboo obeyed.

He woke to the sound of the front door closing, the bed empty beside him and his body still feeling like absolute garbage. Sunlight poured through the windows, so it was sometime in the middle of the day. He also needed to pee.

He didn't want to move.

He needed to pee, though, the demands of his bladder were not going to let him ignore them.

But... moving.

But bathroom.

But blankets. And bed. And body achey.

Quiet voices filtered through the floor, Technoblade's low murmurs and Philza's lighter chatter. A blaze rod snapping and the glug of potions brewing, Philza's laughter, Twitch cawing. Ranboo's ears twitched, the one not pinned to the pillow half-raised and tilted. Listening. He couldn't make out words, but he didn't even really want to. He just liked the sounds of other people, kind people, moving about, conducting their business. It felt homey. Ranboo was too sick to really appreciate it fully, but even so, he *did* appreciate it.

He needed to move his heavy body and go to the bathroom. It was right there, he wouldn't even have to climb down the ladder, Philza had been right and full of foresight—wait. How did... Ranboo know that Philza had been the one to make that architectural decision?

He checked his memory book, skimming over the pages, then skimming over them again because he was sick and sleepy and not paying very good attention.

Huh.

He hadn't written anything down about it.

He blinked at the pages, then let his arms flop down because holding them up was exhausting.

Huh.

He decided to just. Go to the bathroom and not think too hard about it.

His aching body was slow to move, dizzier when he was upright and he sat, taking deep breaths, as he waited for the vertigo to pass. Up on unsteady feet, he blinked and kept a careful hand on the wall. He was *sore*. He was tired. He was thirsty, and needed to pee, and lonely, and felt just so *bad* and...

He went into the bathroom, did his business, and went back to bed, flopping heavily back onto the mattress before he realized that this now meant he was on *top* of the covers and that meant he would need to *move* if he wanted to be *under* them and he did because he was too-hot-cold but he also wanted to just lay there miserably.

"This is the worst," he grumbled quietly, slightly shaky hands rubbing at his arms which felt startlingly cold for how briefly they'd been out from under the covers. His throat hurt. His face hurt. His muscles? Hurt. And his head, though less than this morning, still definitely hurt. His body was one large ache and he could do without it. He wanted to get under the covers. He didn't want to move.

He was only going to get colder if he didn't move. And he'd pushed through worse aches than this, before. He couldn't remember any specific instance, but he knew the statement to be true.

Once again under the covers, body a heavy sack of nails sunk into the mattress, Ranboo grumbled internally that, well, since he wasn't a slave anymore, he didn't *have* to push through aches and fatigue if he didn't want to.

He wasn't sure why that thought irritated him so much.

He was tired. Philza let out a little curl of laughter from the main floor, Technoblade's own joining in a heartbeat after, and Ranboo felt his bad mood dim as he twitched a small smile at the sound. It was hard to stay sour when their laughs were just so... nice. He pressed his face further into the pillow and breathed in the heavy, masculine scent he'd grown so familiar with. This was Technoblade's side of the bed.

Well, the man was large enough that all sides were his sides, but Ranboo's nose was currently aligned with a spot on his pillow that his head would rest. And that was nice, and Ranboo was just about ready to doze back off when his ear perked straight up like a flagpost.

He opened his eyes and subconsciously tugged the blanket tighter around his shoulders as the ladder creaked with weight. Technoblade poked through a second later, looking somehow larger when he was upright and Ranboo was lying down, a little more coherent than he'd been that morning but still abjectly miserable.

"Hey, you're up," Technoblade said.

"Mmm" Ranboo hummed, more vocalization than agreement but he hoped it got the point across. "I had to pee."

Technoblade snorted, broad shoulders shaking minutely, and sat on the edge of the bed. He set a jukebox down sideways and placed another mug on top of the makeshift side table, then two faintly-glowing potions next to it. Ranboo hoped they were for him. It certainly felt like this was the sort of thing that was going to be for him, given the patterns he'd witnessed here in the cabin. Slowly, he crawled his way back up to sitting, blanket pooled in his lap, and he shivered as he watched.

Technoblade was pouring the potions into the softly steaming mug, half of each, one red and the other sort of pinkish. Technoblade stirred it, tapped the spoon against the side lightly to shake the drops off, and handed the mug to Ranboo. The liquid was a pale pink, so there must have been more milk in there before the potions, and Ranboo sipped it timidly.

"The healing pot should help with the instant relief," Technoblade explained as Ranboo drank. "The regen will work on actually taking out whatever's in your system. I'll leave these here if you need the rest of them; drink 'em fast if you're going to drink 'em plain though."

Ranboo could taste why. Even with the milk—and more honey—to mask it, the bitter-tangy-acid of the potions were... not the greatest thing Ranboo had ever put in his mouth. He was grateful for them! Just, that, well, objectively speaking, these were not "potions of tasting good."

"Thank you," Ranboo said quietly, shivering again.

"Are you warm enough?" Technoblade asked with a broad hand to Ranboo's forehead.

Ranboo looked down, feeling stupid. On one hand, not really. He was chilly and wanted to curl up under the blankets. On the other, yes, too warm actually, and Technoblade's palm felt nice against

his heated forehead. His ears swivelled down when Technoblade pulled away, getting off the bed and leaving Ranboo alone. He drank more of the milk, watching Technoblade squat down in front of the small fireplace and pull aside the grate, feeding more wood in and stoking the flames.

Warmth that had nothing to do with the temperature seeped into Ranboo's chest, watching Technoblade fuss with the fire and drag another blanket over to the bed, tucking it around Ranboo's shoulders.

"Thank you," he repeated, tail twitching happily underneath the wool even though his head still felt gross and his body was still heavy and dumb. Actually... he did feel... slightly better already. Whatever was in that potion, Technoblade wasn't joking about it being "instant," huh? Ranboo smiled up at him, probably a little weak and shaky, but Technoblade smiled back and pet his hair away from his face and Ranboo let out a happy little vwoop as he leaned into it.

"Anything else I can get you?" Technoblade asked, the sound of Philza coming up the ladder coming right after.

Ranboo blinked up at him; he'd already given him more than he would've ever expected or asked for. What else *could* he even want? It wasn't like he could ask Technoblade to carry Max up the ladder, that would be cumbersome and also potentially really dangerous, and he was pretty sure cuddling a little furry friend was just about the only way his sick body could possibly be more comfortable.

Twitch fluttered off Philza's shoulder and perched on Ranboo's blanketed knee, Technoblade idly giving them a little scritch-scratch at the top of their head, and Ranboo set the mug down on the sideways jukebox before extending a finger to brush at their breastfeathers as well.

"How's the patient?" Philza asked, back of his cool hand pressed briefly to Ranboo's forehead, and he vwooped.

Oh.

Oh, gee, Philza and Technoblade were waiting for *him* to answer that. Okay. Stupid, that was probably obvious.

"Okay," he said quietly, "better, thank you. Still, um, tired."

"Hungry at all yet?"

Mmmmmng. Ranboo probably *should* eat, all things considered. He'd eaten plenty since coming here so it wouldn't be the end of the world if he didn't, but he hadn't eaten since...

Oh gee, his memory was not doing too hot today. He was pretty sure he hadn't eaten in a while. His body could use the energy to fight off whatever this was. But he also had, like, no appetite, and the idea of putting food in him was. Unpleasant.

He pressed his lips together, ears pointed down, and shook his head minutely.

"Think you could nibble at a bit of bread before you go back to sleep?"

Ranboo nodded. Because Philza asked him to, he could. He took the small hunk, not even a roll's worth, and dutifully took a small bite. His stomach gurgled, but he didn't feel nauseous or upset by

it, so he took another bite. Technoblade was fiddling with the fireplace again, Philza sitting on the side of the bed and half-watching Ranboo eat out of his peripheral. Ranboo appreciated the lack of direct attention. Twitch *was* watching him directly, their head, well, twitching this way and that, examining him through each eye, bobbing in place, ruffling their feathers up large before shaking them out and flattening back down.

“They’re very animated,” Ranboo commented between bites, sleepy and charmed.

Twitch cawed, followed by a, “Pretty bird! Funny bird!”

“Yeah they are,” Philza said with a laugh, bending forward a little to let them beak him on the finger and petting down their feathers, pinching at one and tugging it out before straightening the surrounding vanes.

Before he knew it, the whole roll was gone.

“Feel up to eating more, or is that all?”

Well, now that he’d started, he kind of wanted more. “Um.” He twisted the blanket hem around his fingers, bit his lip, and quietly asked, “A little more?” Because he was free, and he was supposed to *act* like it, and free people asked for more when they were hungry, and also maybe he genuinely would like for Philza and Technoblade to keep giving him nice, comforting, soft things while he was sick and aching and vulnerable.

Philza handed him the other half of the small loaf and Ranboo ate. Despite the blankets, he shivered again, and Philza wrapped an arm around his back and rubbed slowly up and down his arm, Ranboo curling his direction. He wanted to lay down. He wasn’t even *really* upright, all his weight was on Philza or the wall or the mattress, but still, he wanted to lay back down. He felt heavy.

Technoblade couldn’t seem to keep still. The bedroom wasn’t an overly large place, bookshelves and a fireplace and the beds and the weird floaty special book that Ranboo didn’t touch were really the only things in the area. He seemed to be... pacing, if pacing involved stopping to straighten a row of books or stoke the fire or tuck the blanket in around Ranboo’s ankles every seven seconds.

He’d noticed that, about Technoblade. The man couldn’t seem to keep still no matter what he was doing, preferring to stay in motion. Even when he wasn’t working (and really, he was usually working on something) he didn’t like to sit or stand or stay put.

Then, out of nowhere, Technoblade frowned, hand coming up under his mask to rub at his eyes. Ranboo’s ears pinned back with concern (and fear) and he looked between Technoblade and Philza.

“Chat, lay off him,” Philza scolded mildly, Twitch cawing in... support? Maybe they just wanted to feel included. Ranboo shoved the last of the bread in his mouth and felt his aching body start to pull tight and anxious.

Was Chat somebody on the other end of a communicator? Except, neither of them had the telltale glow of activated redstone from their ears. Could Ranboo just not *see* Chat? Or hear them? Was it because he was a mob hybrid?

Technoblade sat down on the bed, both hands on his face now, a frustrated grunt the only sound. Ranboo—Technoblade looked like he was in pain, and Ranboo, wanted to help? Ranboo wanted to—to—something. He—

“Ranboo, have we told you about Chat?” Philza asked, giving Ranboo’s arm a squeeze. He looked away from Technoblade briefly, shook his head, and turned back to his hurting ma—person.

“Ah, sorry to leave you confused. Again.” Philza chuckled self-consciously. “Techno hears voices, mate.”

“Pains in my side,” Technoblade grunted, his pink ears pinned flat, jaw clenched, hard lines of his posture betraying tension.

“Sometimes they get a little too rowdy and give Techno a headache with how loud they’re bein’ and sometimes they ride his ass a little too hard when they disagree with what he’s doing. What’s their problem today, Techno?”

“E.”

“Ah,” Philza said flatly, “And sometimes they like to give him the world’s worst case of tinnitus for no good fuckin’ reason.” Philza sighed, then smiled up at Ranboo.

“Don’t be so worried, mate,” he assured, his hand rubbing up and down Ranboo’s arm, “They’ll calm down and ease off in a minute. Sometimes they can be distracted and sometimes you just gotta let them run their course.”

“What, um, distracts them?”

Philza shrugged. “Anything? They don’t seem to have a very good attention span.”

“Can I help?”

For a moment, Technoblade locked extra tense, then he let out a slow breath, tension bleeding slowly out of him. Ranboo’s confusion was all but palpable.

“Believe it or not, you just did,” Technoblade muttered. He dropped one hand to flop over a knee and rubbed at his face with the other, then resettled his mask properly. “Thanks.”

Uh. “Um.” Well. “You’re welcome?”

Technoblade chuckled and stood, reaching out to knock his knuckles gently against Ranboo’s shoulder. “The voices like you. They think you offering to help is ‘sweet.’”

“Oh. I’m, glad they like me?”

“Mm.” Technoblade felt his forehead again, and made an approving noise low in his throat. “Feels like the potions have kicked in.”

Ranboo nodded, leaning into the touch. His eyes slipped closed. He wanted to lay down.

“Okay, back to sleep,” Technoblade ordered with a breathy laugh, and Ranboo blinked to notice he’d nearly started dozing right then and there. Philza stood and Technoblade helped Ranboo back down onto the mattress, moving the blankets so they were both on top of him and tucking him in. If he’d felt tired when he’d first woken up, he felt exhausted now, and even just keeping his eyes open felt herculean.

Twitch cawed *loudly* when they landed on the windowsill, and an answering hiss followed after. Wait a second. Ranboo knew that hiss.

“Now how the hell did she make it all the way up here?” Philza asked, perplexed, as he grabbed his bird and hauled them away from the glass.

“Looks like your friend is worrying about you,” Technoblade said, opening the window and stepping back.

“Enderchest?” Ranboo asked, half-propped up on an elbow and lacking the strength or energy to go any further. An untrusting growl-rumble sounded from the open space, and Technoblade took another step back.

“She was screaming at me earlier, when I was milking Ranmoo,” Technoblade mentioned. Another hiss, and then a little black cat poked her head through the window, dropped down onto the floor, darted over to the bed, and hopped up on the far corner of the mattress. She kept her eyes on Philza and Technoblade, her ears on Ranboo, and she hissed again.

“Aaaaaand Ranboo’s cat now,” Philza said, holding Twitch very firmly like a football against his side, and using his free hand to close the window. “Love it when pregnant cats make critical missteps.”

“Misstep?” Ranboo asked, laying down again and stretching his hand out towards her, leaving it to rest on the mattress between them. Enderchest sniffed aggressively at him, tail flicking but for all her reluctant exterior, she *did* seem very clearly worried about him.

“She’s about to have babies. She’ll be too weak to wrestle her way out of here and by the time she’s back on her feet we’ll have had the chance to socialize ‘em properly and get ‘em used to people. She’s got a family now whether she likes it or not,” Philza explained with a bright laugh.

“We’ll give her her space though,” Technoblade assured. “And we’ll give you some rest. Don’t get so distracted by the cat you forget to sleep.”

Oh *that* wasn’t going to be an issue. Just as soon as Enderchest darted off or settled down Ranboo had the feeling he was going to be out like a light. Right now, though, she was sniffing and pacing juuuuuust out of reach.

Ranboo laid very still as Technoblade and Philza climbed back down the ladder, his eyes slipping closed. He opened them—sometime, before he managed to fall all the way asleep, when Enderchest started meowing. She shimmied closer, ears flicking back and up and back down and back up and sniffing and yelling and Ranboo carefully moved one heavy hand. She sniffed it, meowed, and bumped it.

He smiled as he was allowed to pet her, only briefly before she padded out of reach again, then meowed, came back into range, and let him thumb at her cheek for a few seconds before moving back out of reach.

He chuckled a little, eyes slipping closed again. “Hey,” he murmured, “I don’t think you know how to be pet.”

She bumped into his hand again and he pet at her blindly, his eyes not cooperating with the whole “opening” thing but he didn’t need to see. There was no need for him to open his eyes, he would

just hold his hand out and when she touched him he would pet her.

His arm was so heavy, though, and he was so *tired*, and he was cold, so he slipped his arm under the blanket again. Enderchest would probably want to slip underneath the bed or on top of one of the tall bookshelves or something, anyway, give her a nice little hide when she realized she couldn't get back outside just yet. He wondered if Philza had shut the trapdoor over the ladder on his way down... He was sure it'd be fine. Enderchest was a smart lady, she wouldn't accidentally fall through. She was meowing at him, and he wanted to pet her, but he was just so tired...

He woke up again, hours later, to a sleeping cat curled up on his pillow and orange light through the western window. He smiled. Slowly, quiet as a mouse, Ranboo lifted his arm and poked gently at one of her little triangle ears. It flicked in her sleep, bapping against his finger and he bit his lip to suppress a little giggle. He brushed his finger, very gently, up the bridge of her nose and across her little head.

He was being gifted something precious, that she was here, all of her own choosing, that she was trusting him enough to sleep near him, close enough that he could touch her while she was vulnerable. He touched a thumb to her cheek and she woke up with a "mrrrp!"

He chuckled, then laughed a little louder as she immediately launched into loud meowings, up on her feet and prowling away from him, having to stop halfway down the bed to stretch.

"So scold, so complain," he giggled as her lecture continued.

Her lament cut off as Philza opened the trap door, poking his head through, and Ranboo rolled over onto his back so he could look.

"Ah, she wake you up mate?"

"I woke her up, sir," Ranboo said quietly, Enderchest growling lowly behind him. Philza paused, sighed out through his nose, and devolved into a breathy chuckle before he shook his head and climbed up the rest of the way and fluffed his wings a little. Enderchest *hissed*, hackles raised and back arched, before darting down underneath the bed, where she resumed growling warily.

"Yeah, yeah, you're very scary," Philza said agreeably, Ranboo closing his eyes and lifting his chin as Philza's hand returned once more to his forehead.

"Fever's down. How're you feeling?"

"Better," Ranboo said, "Still gross, but better."

He could probably get up and do chores, if he had to. Except he was *free* which was *stupid* but if he was gonna be *free* then he wasn't *going* to do chores and if they wanted him to they could put shit back the way it was meant to be.

Not that they would. Even in his head, Ranboo could admit he was being a little absurd. If anything, they seemed determined that Ranboo wasn't going to leave the bed that day.

"If we bring up some tea and stew you probably don't want to ask questions about, would you feel up to it?"

Well that was suspicious. Even so, Ranboo figured that whatever it was, it wouldn't be *bad*. Nothing Technoblade or Philza had given him was ever *bad*.

"Mhm."

The snap of a blaze rod made Ranboo's ear twitch, and he glanced at the open trap door.

"Are you brewing more potions?" he asked, moving his face to a different spot on the pillow that was cool and soothing.

"Yep. Techno's been at it all day since he got back. We've got a chest full of 'em down on the ground floor now."

"Oh."

Philza gently pushed Ranboo's hair from his face, straightening it out and flattening his bedhead, before he gave Ranboo's shoulder a squeeze and returned down the ladder. Ranboo shuffled to the edge of the bed and dangled his arm down, Enderchest hissing once before sniffing his fingers and bumping into them with a mew that sounded almost-apologetic.

He scratched at her lightly. "Hey girl."

She kept moving out of range, then walking back into his hand with a little headbump, and he would pet her for three seconds before she moved away again. It was a very inefficient method of petting, but it seemed to be what she... wanted? Was asking for? It was the option available.

Ranboo propped himself up when Technoblade climbed the ladder, pushing himself up to sitting and he didn't feel particularly cold or exhausted from it. So that was good! Yeah, that was definitely improvement.

"Hallo," he greeted, and Ranboo smiled at him.

Then Enderchest hissed, swiping a paw out from under the bed and clawing at Technoblade's ankles. He was too quick for her, pulling his leg out of the way, and he scolded, "Oh, hush you."

Ranboo didn't even fully register the fear before he was reaching out, grasping Technoblade's arm with all he had. "She's just scared!"

"I—what?"

"She's just scared, please, she didn't mean to!"

"Woah, hey, Ranboo—*breathe!* Slow down, hey, I'm not going to hurt your cat, *jesus!*"

"She—she just—" Ranboo forced himself to take a breath. Take a step back, mentally. This was Technoblade. He was gentle with his livestock, kind, responsible, good to his pets. Ranboo was—no longer part, but he'd seen it. He knew that. He wasn't going to hurt Enderchest.

"You're not going to hurt her," Ranboo muttered, hanging his head and clinging to Technoblade's arm like a lifeline. Slowly, he pulled Ranboo into a hug, bent awkwardly with Ranboo on the bed and Ranboo pressed his face into his chest. "You're not going to hurt her."

“She’s just scared,” Technoblade assured, “We’re all *fine*. Nobody’s in trouble, not you, not the cat we trapped in here.”

Ranboo snorted. “She uh, I guess, does have a good reason to be, a little snippy.”

“Mhm.” Technoblade pulled back slowly, cupping Ranboo’s face and searching it, white irises visible behind the mask. Ranboo glanced down, anxious to have made eye contact even briefly, anxious because something he loved so much had just tried to *hurt* somebody so strong—but nothing bad had happened. Nothing bad was going to happen. Ranboo breathed, willed his pulse to slow down as it pounded through his ears. His hands were shaking. His face was in Technoblade’s palm, cradled as the moment drew out, long and silent but... not bad.

“You good?”

Ranboo nodded. He was—fine. He was also perfectly willing to be well behaved, but *apparently* that wasn’t the type of good these people wanted from him.

He stamped down on that irritation. Technoblade and Philza were *kind* to him, he had no right to be annoyed with them. For anything. Even if they did free him when he didn’t even *want* to be freed and iiiiiiit was fiiiiiiiine it was fine, it was *fine* he was *fine* he was *okay*!

He took a deep breath, watched as Technoblade poured the other halves of the potions into a mug of tea and set a bowl of stew into Ranboo’s lap.

Honestly, he was lucky that hadn’t triggered an attack. He pinched the spoon and swirled it around the stew, staring at the mushrooms and... what looked like flowers. It was kind of odd that that hadn’t triggered an attack. The stew tasted... fine. *Why* hadn’t that triggered a panic attack? Was it because he was tired? Because Technoblade had calmed him down before it could escalate? Because Ranboo trusted Technoblade not to hurt Enderchest, even though she’d tried to hurt him? Where had Technoblade and Phil even *found* daisies and dandelions this far north?

The more Ranboo ate the more he became aware that it... had more inside it than just mushrooms and flowers. He decided he didn’t want to know what. He also decided he didn’t want to think about why he didn’t panic. He *also* decided he would really like it if Technoblade would stick around for a little while.

But that meant having to ask.

“Um, sir?”

“You can just ask.”

“Right.” Ranboo’s shoulders hunched, ears down. Right, right, he remembered that now. He—right. “Would you, um...”

“...Do you need me to leave?”

“I-I, I would like you to stay?” Ranboo rushed, high and anxious. Did Technoblade *want* to leave? Ranboo was being needy, of course Ranboo was being needy, *greedy*; he’d already taken up so much of this man’s day, received so much.

“Yeah?”

Ranboo nodded, worrying his lip with downcast eyes. “Would you sit with me?”

For an anxious heartbeat, Technoblade was still, but then the mattress shifted and he settled, and Ranboo leaned against his side.

“I’m not going to hurt your cat,” Technoblade repeated, draping his cape around Ranboo’s shoulders.

Ranboo glanced up at his chin momentarily, then looked back at the stew in his hands. “I know.”

“You *know*?” Checking. Making sure. Like he wasn’t sure if Ranboo actually knew that, actually believed it.

Ranboo nodded. “I was just—I saw her swipe at you and, it was reflex. You wouldn’t—you wouldn’t do that, I don’t think.” Ranboo’s memory wasn’t great, but for just a moment, something he couldn’t quite put his finger on, just, just this... memory of a memory. He felt. Like something like this had happened before. Some dog or cat or slave had been scared and—Ranboo, it, well, it was probably for the best, that he couldn’t remember.

Technoblade sighed. “I know... that I am frightening. Nine times out of ten that works in my favor.” Technoblade’s hand rubbed up and down Ranboo’s arm absently. “But I don’t want you to be scared of me. And I don’t want you to think—” He huffed. “You’ve spent this whole time thinking less than great things about me and what I’m willing to do. I want to be as clear as possible moving forward. So, I’m not going to hurt your cat. That’s not the kind of person I’m trying to be.”

Ranboo nodded again.

“I was just—scared.”

Technoblade was quiet a moment, palm warm on Ranboo’s arm. “Yeah, you were just scared,” he repeated softly. He nudged Ranboo. “Don’t forget to eat.”

So Ranboo ate and drank the tea, and Philza and Twitch eventually joined them. Philza brought Technoblade a book from the half circle of bookshelves, as well as selecting one for himself, and Ranboo wrote everything he still had down in his memory book.

Even though he was sick, he was writing mostly good things. Enderchest was inside, though Ranboo wasn’t overly sure if that was going to end well just yet, given her temperament. He’d slept nearly all day and still felt gross, but good enough to write. Philza and Technoblade were... it felt vain to write, but the only verb that fit was that they were *doting* on him. It felt arrogant and giddy, but it was the truth. They’d done nothing but dote on him all day.

Now they sat, on either side of him, cozy in the bed they’d let him into. Philza was taking notes of his own in a small, blank book, reading an instruction manual of some sort. Something to do with bees? Technoblade had his mask off, reading glasses perched on the scar over his nose. Ranboo leaned his head against Technoblade’s shoulder, skimming the words of the book in his hands. It was some sort of story. Something about a sea and a man named Damon.

Technoblade turned his head, Ranboo glancing up only to make accidental eye contact. He looked away anxiously—he shouldn’t, he, prying and—

“Would you like me to read to you?”

Ranboo glanced at his chin hopefully. “Yes?”

Philza slipped his pen between the pages of his notebook and closed it, setting the reference book down in his lap. “What’re we reading today?”

“Damon and Pythias.”

“Ah, an old favorite.”

Ranboo’s ears twitched, his tail thumping futilely underneath the blanket. A favorite? Something they liked, and reread, and he could hear it too?

Technoblade flipped back a page, scrawling letters depicting the story’s title while the page before it had the final few paragraphs of whichever story came before. An anthology. Right? That was the word for when a book had a bunch of little books inside it? Ranboo was pretty sure that was the word.

Ranboo smushed his face against Technoblade’s shoulder, the healing potion nearly erasing his headache entirely, and his eyes tracked along the words as Technoblade read. His tail continued to wag against the mattress, trapped in snuggly confines, and he made little gasps and “ah”s at unfortunate events and little “hrms” at seemingly contrived setbacks, finally letting out a happy little vwoop when Pythias returned to Syracuse in time to save his friend’s life. Neither Philza nor Technoblade remarked on his noisiness, or his ceaseless wagging, and when Technoblade asked if Ranboo wanted him to keep going he nodded with upright ears.

The sun set outside, Technoblade relying on lantern light to read by, and when Ranboo yawned so hard his jaw clicked, Technoblade took it as a sign that this would be the last story for the night.

“I’ve still gotta get Ranmoo back in her pen and Carl back in the stable, plus groom him,” Technoblade pointed out, returning the book to its shelf and stretching his back with a pop. His readers went back into his inventory and he resettled his mask onto his face before descending down the ladder.

The crown suited him, Ranboo thought, staring at the space he’d left.

“Would you like me to leave you and Enderchest be for a moment?” Philza asked, getting out of bed as well.

“Yes, please,” Ranboo answered quietly, dangling his hand over the edge of the bed again in hopes she’d come say hello. Philza took his nightclothes into the small bathroom, taking Twitch with him, and Ranboo made kissy noises.

“They’re gone now,” he said, “For a little while. I know this is all scary and new for you, but they won’t hurt you. You can come out for a minute.”

Enderchest made an unhappy noise, and Ranboo sighed.

“Okay. I know it took you a while to warm up to me, I shouldn’t expect you to like them right away. Can you smell Max through the floor? I hope so; it’d be nice if you two could get along. Max is friendly, I think he’d want to be friends with you, but you’d have to get used to him, huh?”

Enderchest neglected to respond.

“I hope it isn’t too stressful for you, being stuck on the same floor as us. I know it’s probably a lot to put on you for your first day, but Max is on the main floor and the ground floor gets chilly. I think Max would be more stressful for you than Technoblade and Philza, even though I guess they’re all bigger and stronger than you, huh? I promise they’re nice, though. They’re the ones who give me all of the fish I feed you, and they’ve been very kind to me.”

Ranboo sighed.

“You’ll have to learn that on your own time though, I guess. Since cats can’t talk, and you don’t even know what I’m saying.”

Ranboo let himself fall quiet, then, his arm dangling over the edge of the bed in hopes she’d come bump her head against it again. But she seemed resolute about staying in her little dark corner under the bed, and Ranboo guessed he couldn’t blame her. Personally, he wasn’t overly fond of being in dark, enclosed spaces when he was scared—his old cell was called the *punishment* room for a reason—but he understood the need to do what she had to, in order to feel safe. Whatever let her feel secure or protected, even if it was just a low bedframe and a couple of walls.

Philza opened the bathroom door a while later, dressed for bed with Twitch on his shoulder. A heartbeat after, Technoblade opened the door downstairs.

“She come out at all?”

“No sir.”

Philza’s fingers slid through his hair and Ranboo closed his eyes happily at the touch.

“Does your memory book say anything about calling me ‘sir’ in it?” Philza asked, and Ranboo opened his eyes back up with a small frown. He took out his memory book, flipping to the end, and, oh!

Philza wanted him to do *what*? That wasn’t *fair*! What was he supposed to call them, if not sir? Was this because he was free? But free people called each other sir, sometimes. His last master’s paid staff had called him sir, they just didn’t call him master. This felt like an unrealistic expectation. And sure, Ranboo was pretty used to those, but not from these people. Not from Philza and Technoblade, kind people, who were patient with him and his garbage brain, who gave him things like *explanations* and tried to work with him, rather than just giving him orders and expecting him to figure it out on his own.

Philza’s finger grazed along the lower shell of Ranboo’s ear, causing it to twitch-twitch-twitch and bap against his finger. Ranboo reached up, attention stolen, and grabbed Philza’s wrist.

For an awful, horrible moment, he had the strong urge to *bite* that hand, his ear tingling in a way that was almost-itchy but shivery and goosebumpy, except *no*! No biting!!!! No biting Philza!!!! No biting anyone!!!! Where had that thought come from!?!? He pressed his forehead against Philza’s hand instead, his memory book momentarily discarded on the mattress, tail curling in close to his chest. He rolled onto his other side, still clinging to Philza’s wrist and pressing his face against his hand, but then kind of rubbed his ear against the pillowcase to try and dispel the weird sensation there.

Philza was laughing at him, high and bright and charmed, and Ranboo once again felt the need to chomp at him. Just a little. Like when Twitch beaked one of them.

Oh, but, his memory book, he'd been—

He stashed it back in his inventory and scooted over so Philza had room on the bed.

“Um,” he started, “If, if I’m not supposed to call you ‘sir’ anymore, what...”

Philza half-sighed, half chuckled, and ruffled Ranboo’s hair. “Just call me Phil, mate.”

Oh, Ranboo would *not* be doing that.

Except maybe he... had to? Now? If sir wasn’t allowed anymore?

...And maybe he would, anyway, because he was a *free* person, and *free* people didn’t *have* to do everything they were told, and *free* people didn’t have to obey every single order they were given, and if Philza wanted to *make* him obey then he should’ve thought of that before he decided he wanted Ranboo to be *free*!

He was being stupid. Belligerent. Whiny. God, what was *wrong* with him? He had no right to be upset with Philza for anything, not after everything he’d done for him.

Ranboo sighed, watching as Philza slipped into bed, Twitch fluttering to their perch near the fire as he did. Ranboo curled forward, forehead pressed to Philza’s shoulder, and vwooped quietly when Philza slid an arm under him and tucked him against his much smaller side. Ranboo smiled, draping his own noodle-long arm over Phil and clinging, nuzzling against Philza’s chest and letting his eyes close.

See? See this, brain? Ranboo *liked* Philza. He was warm and kind and smelled nice and held him and stroked strong fingers through his hair and made him feel happy and safe and good. He didn’t *want* to rebel against him just because he was being a pouty brat. He *wanted* to make Philza happy and pleased with him and do the things he wanted Ranboo to do.

Even if that thing was *stupid*—no, no, Philza was right and Ranboo was wrong. Philza was kind and warm and good and Ranboo would agree with him on anything he said.

Ranboo’s ears flicked up in attention as Philza shifted, squeezing Ranboo about the shoulders a little closer and—oh! He pressed a little kiss to Ranboo’s hair, making Ranboo vwoop in delighted surprise and his tail thump in its blanketed confines. Philza laughed, airy and bright, and pat his arm twice before he resumed petting at Ranboo’s hair.

Technoblade returned, changed, and climbed into bed with them. Despite the fact that he’d been outside, he still radiated heat, his ever present *warmth*, and Ranboo rolled over so he could curl in close to him.

Even though he’d slept all day, Ranboo was just about ready to doze back off. Philza’s wing was spread over them, Technoblade had an arm draped over his waist, Ranboo’s tail was twisted around Philza’s calf and his leg was crossed over Technoblade’s ankle. He felt good. He liked it here.

His ear got that goosebumpy itch and instinctively started flicking again, bapping against Philza's finger. Ranboo snatched his wrist again, a little harder, this time going so far as to open his mouth before he got ahold of himself and clamped his jaw with a click, pulling Philza's hand to his forehead so hard he accidentally slapped himself with the man's hand. What was wrong with him!?

"Did you almost just bite me?" Philza asked incredulously, already laughing.

"I, no, I, I just—" Ranboo stammered, unsteady unease, rather than flat out terror, making him tremble.

"Dude that would have been hilarious," Technoblade laughed as well, the arms encircling Ranboo tightening jovially.

"I—" Ranboo's cheeks burned, his heart pounded, but.

"I would've had it coming," Philza snorted, "I was messin' with you, sorry, it was just so cute."

"Cute!" Twitch chimed from their perch near the fire, sounding happy to have included themselves in the conversation.

The two continued laughing, and Ranboo... joined in. Quiet, hesitant laughter, more of a breathy chuckle, but. Even though it was at "his expense," he didn't feel like the butt end of a joke.

Playful.

It felt playful.

The night dragged them down to sleepy silence soon after, Ranboo's body not forgetting all the work it had done to fight off whatever had made him sick.

He felt better in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Ngl I'm glad it's Monday I keep *fiddling* with this chapter but now it's off in the world and no longer my responsibility. Hope you enjoyed!!

As ever, any comments, thoughts, or feedback you have are dearly appreciated <3

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

A couple of you guessed what's happening this chapter. How's it feel to be right?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The days following his impromptu illness were, in his opinion, the worst. He'd been too sick to worry about Pondering His New Life Situation and how that Affected His Relationships with Technoblade and Philza, instead reverting to a needy, clinging child when he was awake and sleeping through most of the day.

Now that he felt better, there was nothing between him and his thoughts except for the holes in his brain. And for once, they weren't exactly fending his mind off.

He was free. More importantly, he needed to *act* free. Technoblade and Philza had thought he was free the whole time, which, well, meant he was. Technoblade had “rescued” him, and Ranboo was—grateful, of course he was grateful—but. He also. Just. HHHNG!

Why did things have to change!? He got that his status as a slave didn't align with their morals and beliefs or whatever, but! But!!

He draped himself over the railing of the front stairs, warble-hissing in the back of his throat in frustration.

Everything was too big to think about. He didn't... he wasn't smart enough.

Fortunately, the little things, the things that Ranboo did have the brainpower to process, those were largely unchanged. Technoblade and Philza still had him help out around the house, except now they phrased their orders very deliberately as suggestions or questions. Ranboo wasn't sure if he appreciated it or not. On one hand, it felt like they were babying him. On the other... he wasn't proud enough to deny that he probably needed babying. He was stupid, fumbling, skittish, over-scared. It burned him with humiliation that he would *need* to be handled so gently, but he couldn't argue against how nice it felt, that they would even bother.

On the upside, the biggest change was that they let him into their bed on a nightly basis now. Nobody had bothered to move Ranboo's bed back to where it was, and Technoblade had mentioned that they should just construct one single large bed that was wide and long enough for all three of them, throw the other two in storage.

Ranboo would happily take the task, just, like, tomorrow. In the days immediately following his surprise illness, Philza and Technoblade had ordered him to stay around the cabin and not push himself, so he'd settled onto the couch with Max's head on one thigh and started in on a blanket for Ranboo, like he'd promised her. It matched his outfits, to a certain degree. Thick and warm for her. He was proud of it, for all he'd made quite a few mistakes at the beginning (and a couple sprinkled

throughout). It was a little lopsided, clearly novice, but he'd made it and it was only for a cow, after all.

He breathed a puff of fog into the cold air, railing digging into his abdomen as he recalled how he'd gone outside, bundled in his coat and one of Technoblade's capes, to deliver the blanket to her. Ranboo had seemed, at least, to like it. Technoblade had followed Ranboo out and leaned against the fencing nearby to watch, then ushered him back inside a little while after he'd secured the blanket around her.

Ranboo knew it made sense. Runaways were always kept under close scrutiny, often much harsher than Technoblade's awkward hovering, and Ranboo, for all he hadn't meant to, *had* run. On the other hand. Ranboo was *free* now. And if he was *free* then he could run away if he wanted to, right? He could go live in the nearby village *if he wanted to*. Because he was *free*.

Shame and guilt and anger swirled in Ranboo as a single snowflake coasted past his nose, clawtips scraping against the railing and warble-hissing again. Shame for needing watched over. Guilt for having run in the first place. Anger because why should Technoblade enforce anything, if Ranboo was such a "free person" now?

More shame at being angry at all, burning-flushed humiliation across his cheeks for his ungrateful thoughts. His audacity. Technoblade had gifted him something many slaves would give anything for, and he was *angry* at him for it? At Technoblade and Philza, who were kind and gentle and so endlessly patient with him? Who fed him and clothed him and kept him warm and touched him without pain?

A bonus to Technoblade making Ranboo stick close to him in the days following his illness was that Technoblade had almost never denied Ranboo touch when he asked for it. The two instances he *had* said no were first, when he was about to start dinner, and second, when he needed to go to the bathroom and had to stop putting it off. And when he'd come back from that, he'd held out his arm and let Ranboo tuck in against his side, so really, it wasn't like Ranboo was even denied.

He huffed loudly, blowing at another snowflake that slipped past him. It was flurrying, light and scattered, clouds barely heavy enough to block the sun. They were in no real danger of a storm.

Ranboo was getting better, he was pretty sure, at the whole "~~pretending~~ acting like he was free" thing. He could now, more or less, confidently ask Technoblade for a hug and be relatively certain that he would receive one. He very carefully did not call Philza *anything*. He tried to take initiative and predict their wants, and act on those predictions before they needed to ask or order. It made him look, hopefully, like he was acting independently. Because that was what they wanted, right? For Ranboo not to rely on his masters to give his life direction, for him to figure it the fuck out on his own already.

You are agitated.

Ranboo glanced to the left out of the corner of his eyes, an Enderman slowly approaching the house with a grass block in her hands, gaze just to the side of Ranboo so they couldn't have made eye contact, even if he'd flubbed.

Yes ma'am.

Endermen didn't really have... *genders*, so the honorific wasn't really a "ma'am" or a "sir," but more of a "respected individual who knows more than me/whose knowledge I defer to." But like,

succinct, all encapsulated in a clicking trill. Ranboo couldn't remember when or where he'd learned Voidtongue—or where he'd learned that it was even called Voidtongue, for that matter—but he knew it as well as he knew Common, so clearly someone must have taught him, at some point in his life.

You live with dangerous non-Endermen.

Yes ma'am.

They hurt you?

No, ma'am, they are kind to me. I am not pain-agitated.

Speaking Voidtongue was different from speaking Common. The sentences were structured slightly to the side, it was both more direct, and more... vague. Much could be encapsulated in a single sentence, but Voidtongue did not allow for a great deal of beating around the bush. There were also *so* many words for “agitation” and “distress,” allowing Ranboo to succinctly describe both the nature and intensity of his experiences without struggling with rambling sentences to explain.

The Enderman approached the stairs and set the grass block she was carrying in Ranboo's hands. The two of them stared at the block together for a long, quiet moment.

It felt good to hold. Whatever Enderman hindbrain Ranboo had, it was pleased with the sensation of cool dirt and brittle arctic scrub.

Thank you ma'am.

This helps?

It does not help, but I like it and it is a kind gesture.

What will help?

Ranboo shook his head. She released the dirt block and set her hands on top of his, pressing them further into the frozen soil before releasing entirely. He pulled it off the railing and settled the block against the front of his belly, vocalizing in a way that the Enderman probably understood better than Ranboo himself did.

If you do have ways to help, speak them.

Ranboo smiled thinly, clawtips digging into the soothing dirt.

Thank you. I do not know much. I am confused-agitated. My life here is good-different from what I am used to, but I am still confused-agitated and fear-agitated. The dangerous non-Endermen are my— Ranboo pursed his lips, tail twitching. Her tail twitched in mirror of his, longer and fuller than his was, with an end that swayed like beautiful long fur, rather than his fluffy tuft. Ranboo sighed. **I don't know the word for it in Voidspeak. They... mentor-caretake me and give me direction.**

The implication of the word “mentor-caretake” was that they also protected him and ensured his wellbeing, which he guessed was about as accurate as he was going to get. He certainly wouldn't call what they did parent-caretaking, since, well, they weren't his parents. ~~He wouldn't call it family-caretaking either; he was just some weird houseguest to them, nothing more.~~

Do you have a family?

He thought of Philza and Technoblade, their warmth and kindness and patience and generosity. But he wouldn't lie to her.

No, ma'am.

She nodded, vocalizing in a way that made him feel like she understood. He "hrm"ed back at her, and it must have been a less-than-Ender sound because she let out a vwooping peal of laughter before running long, slender fingers through his hair.

Strange(positive connotation) little one, be safe with your dangerous ones and lower your agitation. If you need help in the future, I am willing to give it.

Ranboo vwoop-trilled his thanks, thumbs brushing against the pleasant texture of the dirt, and he watched her resume her aimless wandering. She bent down at the end of the stairs, sinking her long, tapered fingers into the earth like a knife through butter, and pulled a block of grass from its place. He vwooped sweetly, always loving to watch. When full-Endermen pried up dirt they always made it look so... inviting. Enticing. Ranboo couldn't, himself, though goodness knew he'd tried. Though faint and vague, he did have the ability to recall memories of him with dirt on his claws and a frustrated mess of clumps and grass.

She teleported, but accidentally landed too close to Carl, who whinnied and reared. She teleported again, deftly avoiding the startled horse's large hooves, and Ranboo's tail swayed as he watched her go.

He took the grass block inside, stowing it only briefly in his inventory as he climbed the ladder.

"Hey, Miss Enderchest," he greeted, her meowing starting up just as soon as his head poked through the hatch. He sat on the edge of the bed and scritchd at her cheeks.

Bonus to staying inside a lot for the last few days: Enderchest was now more or less entirely warmed up to him. She was still distrustful of Technoblade and Philza, but Ranboo had known her longest and was the one who fed her the most.

(Part of him was happy, to know he was her favorite. That she liked him best of all, and didn't treat Technoblade or Philza with any kind of special favor even though she was safe and they were also kind to her. Part of him felt like being happy about that was selfish.)

(Max favored Technoblade endlessly, though, and Philza had Twitch, so it probably was fine).

"Look what I got," Ranboo said, taking out the grass block and humming contentedly to himself to feel the dirt between his hands again. Enderchest sniffed it, examining each corner, and even propped her paws up on top and stretched herself up to sniff at the grass, her belly protruding.

"You're gonna need to have your kittens soon, you know. You can't leave 'em in the pot for too long or you'll overcook them. Watch, I bet anything they're going to come out all black-furred and burnt." Ranboo giggled quietly at his own joke, tail thumping, and he bent to press a quick kiss atop Enderchest's head. She meowed at him, scolding, and he giggled again.

"I know, I know, so complain. Whatever will happen to your reputation now that I am giving you kisses?"

He thumbed at the dirt and hummed to himself, Enderchest circling twice before flopping down into a little donut, her back pressed to his hip. The first few days, he'd spent this part of the day making a blanket for Ranmoo. Then Technoblade and Philza had taken turns having him help them with small tasks around the cabin, once he was more back on his feet. It was the first day that the two of them had left him entirely alone, out from under their watchful gazes.

Maybe they felt confident that he wouldn't bolt again, now? Maybe this was a test. Or maybe they just got sick of babysitting him. Whatever the case, Philza was off fishing, and Technoblade was in the village "trying not to get swindled," because apparently it was a fairly frequent occasion that people would look at a giant, heavily muscled pig-hybrid and go "yeah that looks like a guy I wanna cheat."

Ranboo couldn't fathom the minds of some people.

He could go mining, as seemed to be his go-to when he wanted something to do. He could sit here and pet Enderchest. He could sit here and just hold a cube of dirt and make noises to himself. It was good dirt! Very nice dirt, given to him by a kind stranger passing through. He kind of wanted to set it down in the bedroom, where he could look at it and touch whenever he wanted.

He wouldn't, of course, because that was a *terrible* idea. Except he *wanted* to though. But he wasn't going to do that because doing that would bother Technoblade and Philza, so he wasn't going to do that. But he kind of really wanted to put the grass block in the bedroom. But. No.

Except. Would Technoblade and Philza actually be bothered? They weren't bothered by much. At least, they weren't bothered by a lot of the things that Ranboo's fragmented brain thought that they should be bothered by. And what if they *were* bothered? They weren't, going to hurt him, right? They kept promising that. That they weren't going to hurt him. What if he did? What if he did something to bother them, what would happen? What would they do?

He stared at the grass block.

He stared at the floor.

“Enderchest,” he said, relishing the way she mrrp’ed and twisted, paws in the air and belly exposed. He scritched at her cheek. “I’m going to do something probably *very* stupid.”

He picked a nice spot, out of the way, directly, but still somewhere he could easily see and access the block, somewhere that wasn't hidden, just not an immediate tripping-danger. He set the grass block down.

He should pick it back up he should pick it back up he should pick it back up he should pick it back
up he should pick it back up he should pick it back up he should pick it back up he should pick it
back up he should pick it back up he should pick it back up he should pick it back up he should
pick it back up he should pick it back up he should pick it back up he should pick it back up he
should pick it back up he should pick it back up he should pick it back up he should pick it back up
he should pick it back up he should pick it back up he should pick it back up.

He wasn't going to pick it back up though. He was going to wait, and see what happened. The other two set things that they liked down all the time. Free people put things they liked in the places they lived. Ranboo was *free*, they wouldn't hurt him, he—wanted to know. He wanted to know what would happen. Would they not care? Would they yell at him? Would they prove themselves liars and smack him for being a stupid idiot?

He shouldn't think like that, they weren't liars, they were nice to him, they were kind, they hadn't hurt him, they weren't going to hurt him, they were *good*. They were good, they were good people, but they were also people, right? And people lost their tempers. And Ranboo needed—well, probably didn't need, but *wanted* to know what would happen when they did. When he intentionally provoked them.

Technoblade came back from the village not too long after (or maybe it was a while, maybe Ranboo was just stuck in his head for it)(time was a flimsy thing for him. Fickle). Ranboo could hear him opening and closing chests, but didn't move from where he was curled around Enderchest on the bed. He felt his heartbeat, felt the way his body was tensing. He deliberately continued petting her, her whiskers ticklish against the bridge of his nose, and stared at her dark fur and the way his white hand stood out starkly against her.

Technoblade climbed the ladder and paused briefly at the sight of Ranboo on the bed. He reached out and scratched lightly at Ranboo's bangs, making Ranboo vwoop quietly and thump his tail on the mattress. Enderchest stretched her paws up into the air and hissed at Technoblade sleepily, really just for her reputation's sake at this point. He gave her a skritch with a single finger between her little ears which she attempted to claw, her little paws fwp-fwp-fwpping in the air and her hind legs going all akilter. Ranboo laughed quietly, subdued, and curled an arm around her so she didn't accidentally fall off the edge of the bed, her tail bapping him in the face as she reoriented.

"The cleric in town is expanding trades," Technoblade mentioned idly, stowing what looked like enchanted books in one of the bookshelves around his own enchantment table. "Ideally I'll be able to buy an actual blessed bell, here sooner or later."

Ranboo did not know what that was.

"That's nice," he said, running a finger over Enderchest's toe beans.

Technoblade stood from the bookshelf, turned, and did a quick double take at the block of grass. Ranboo's ears pinned back, he couldn't help it, but he very deliberately did *not* cower, even as acid churned in his gut.

What are you going to do about it?

"Ranboo, what is that?" Technoblade sounded baffled.

"A grass block."

"Wh—no. Ranboo clean that up."

Ranboo was on his feet before he even really registered he was moving, Enderchest meowing loudly behind him as he knelt and pulled the block into his inventory. It occurred to him, after he'd done so, that he *could* have tried telling Technoblade no.

But making a mess and outright defiance were two separate things, and Ranboo wasn't sure he had it in him to try the second one. He'd wanted to know what would happen if he acted out, and what happened was Technoblade told him to correct the action. It was—deceptively simple, really. Make a mess, clean it up. No shouting, no hitting, nothing more than the mildest of irritation and a little bafflement.

Technoblade's hand ruffled his hair as he continued to kneel there, pondering. He looked up at him, eyes landing on the tip of his mask from the weird angle.

"Is that where the hole in the front yard came from?"

Well, more or less. The two were connected by the same Enderman, so. "Mmm."

"Why?"

Ranboo blinked, ears flicking down, then back to neutral, then flared out to the sides as he deliberated that.

"I wanted to?"

Technoblade canted his head to the side, then blew out a rush of air with a shrug. "Alright. Don't put dirt in my house, though, think of my property value."

"Okay."

Technoblade descended the ladder. "Want to help with lunch?"

"Okay."

Ranboo kissed Enderchest, earning himself more scolding, recorded the events in his memory book, and followed Technoblade down. Whatever weird itch inside his brain that had prompted him to try acting out was apparently sated, and he was on his best behavior for the rest of the day. When he crawled into bed that night, he hesitated before curling against Technoblade's chest, as he'd taken to doing since becoming a seemingly-permanent resident in their bed. But there was *no way* Technoblade was actually secretly upset with him for the dirt, so curl against him he did.

He sighed, nose pressed into the linen of Technoblade's nightshirt. Arms around him, Philza's wing stretched over, safe, warm, secure. He had a whole line of memories, now, of this. A string of precious beads where each bauble was a night that he laid between them and got to savor this, cherish this. Got to see the way the moonlight cut a heavy silhouette of the man he was pressed against, got to listen to their breathing, slow and steady and a little nasally with Philza, only audible there in the silence of the night, got to smell the mixture of cloth and natural scent, got to feel their radiating warmth and the press of kind arms against him.

Part of him was aware that surely, surely this had to come to some sort of end, or at the very least, something would spoil how good this felt. He was undeserving of things this *wonderful*, and even *if* that wasn't true, he still couldn't expect it to last forever. They'd get tired of him or he'd fuck it up somehow or they'd even just decide he was too old for this, and they'd kick him out to sleep on his own again. But until then. Until then.

Until then, Philza's wing was a comforting weight, Ranboo's back pressed to his chest. Until then, Technoblade's breath was soft in his hair, Ranboo's arm draped over his waist.

The itch came back the next day.

Ranboo didn't, didn't *want* to feel angry, and dissatisfied, and *weird*. He didn't want the strange and growing compulsion to just. To act out. To see what they would do about it. And really, anything he might be brave enough to do were such *little* things, anyway, what could he possibly gain from

doing them in the first place? A lifetime of “don’t be a bother” was hung around his neck but now he had to act like a free person to appease them and that was *so hard* even though they largely didn’t change their routine.

Because they had, right, they *had* been treating him like a fellow free person, which meant *they* didn’t have to change, it was on *Ranboo* to change, and yes, of course, he would, if that satisfied them, but if he was only doing it to avoid the consequences of displeasing them then was he *really* acting like he was free?

His head kept going in circles. It had been going in circles ever since he started feeling better. He *knew* what would happen if he acted out: they’d tell him to knock it off and fix whatever he’d messed up. There was no reason, no reason, no reason—but what if he *defied* them?

He wouldn’t.

But *what if he did*?

He *wouldn’t*.

They’d get mad, right? They’d snap at him, Philza had basically said as much during their long, exhausting conversation (right? He couldn’t remember *exactly*, all his memories of that day had to be prompted by his memory book, but he was pretty sure...). The two of them weren’t saints, their patience wasn’t infinite, they got frustrated and snappy and would run out of rope eventually. Every owner—free person—did.

Ranboo was free.

Maybe he didn’t want to be patient with them.

No, no, no, that was wrong, that was a *terrible* thing to think, childish and spoiled and troublemaking just to make trouble. Belligerent. A whiny little brat throwing temper tantrums in his brain. He wouldn’t defy them. What the hell was wrong with him? Of course he would be “patient” with them, he had *nothing*, to be impatient about! *They* were the ones being patient with *him* not the other way around never the other way around he would *not* defy them!

But *what if*—

No, he couldn’t, he couldn’t do that, he was *terrified* of reaching the end of their patience he was *so scared of it*—

Except if they weren’t going to hurt him, and they weren’t going to kick him out unless he “acted like a slave,” which, that was such *bullshit* actually!!!! He hated that, he hated that so much! All he’d ever been was a slave! All he’d ever done was act like one! It wasn’t *fair* that he just had to *figure it the fuck out*! He wanted direction, he wanted orders, he wanted them to *tell* him what would count and what he could do to prove to them that he was “adjusting” and “recovering” but needing direction was just further proof that he *wasn’t* cut out to be a free person, he wasn’t cut out for anything other than taking his master’s orders he was shit-stupid and obedient why couldn’t he —

Why even steal—“rescue”—him in the first place if he wasn’t what they wanted!? Why demand so much change from him!?! It wasn’t fair—

He was whining, even if just in his own head. He was being actually, legitimately ungrateful; they'd done so much for him, treated him so well, naturally they could demand things back from him; it was how it worked. Even free people made demands from those they'd given goods or services.

So he *wouldn't* act out, he wouldn't, he'd sit at the crafting table and turn the wool into a mattress large enough to fit all three of them and *what if he didn't!*?

No, not "what if he didn't," he *was* going to do his tasks and he was *not* going to upset them just for the sake of upsetting them because that was *stupid* and he *liked them* and they were *kind* to him he *didn't* want to upset them!

He just wanted to know what would happen if he *did*.

No!!! No he didn't!!! He could go all the way to his grave *just fine* not knowing what they'd do if he defied them or pissed them off on purpose!

It wasn't something he wanted to know! Or needed to know! The only reason he seemingly wanted to know was because this was a new situation and his brain was *garbage!*

He hated this. He hated feeling mad. He couldn't remember ever feeling *mad*, before, just scared or confused. And now, here, with the people *least* deserving of his wretched, ungrateful anger, *now* he was feeling this way?

He hated his brain he hated his brain he hated his brain he hated his brain.

"Hey, Ranboo," Philza greeted.

Ranboo startled, nearly knocking over the pile of wool he was turning into bedding. Ranboo blinked, reorienting himself. Philza was in the door of the main floor. Ranboo was seated at the crafting table, working on the large bed Technoblade had mentioned a few days ago. Philza and Technoblade had been searching for bees and working on building an insulated hive for them. Right. Right. Okay.

"Hello sir."

The moment the word was out his mouth, he winced. So much for deliberately not calling Philza anything.

"You know you can just call me Phil, mate."

And Ranboo *clenched* his jaw at that, tail thrashing unhappily behind him and ears pinned. Yeah, yeah, he knew, he fucking knew, that little sentence mocked him every single time he opened up his goddamn memory book. He *knew* he wasn't supposed to call either of them sir anymore. And you know what? He hated it. Free people called other free people by honorifics. Technoblade didn't have this problem! It was literally *just* Philza! It wasn't *fair!*

Ranboo looked directly at Philza, close to his eyes, straight at the little green earring of his. Deliberately, intentionally, sullen and defiant, Ranboo said, "I am aware, *sir*."

Philza's lips parted, eyes blinking wide, the picture definition of taken aback.

All of Ranboo's fight, all his defiance, all his belligerence, his fucking *audacity* left him in a breath, left his body behind to deal with the fallout of his anger's actions, and he sank to the floor like a doll with its strings cut. Kowtowing, hands over his mouth in *horror*, he softly pleaded, "I'm sorry."

"Ohhh boy, okay, here we go. Shit, it's okay."

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "I'm so sorry s—Philza, *Phil*," he appeased, volume rising, "I, I didn't mean to—" Yes he did, *liar*. "I wasn't—I—I'm sorry!" Ungrateful, ungrateful, ungrateful, selfish, whiny, waste of space waste of air waste of fucking dirt he stood on stupid fucking *moron*—

"Shhhh, shshshshsh," Philza hushed, bending down and physically lifting Ranboo, one arm under his belly hoisting him up over his shoulder. Ranboo wailed, Ender and shaking, and clung blindly to Philza's haori as he was carried, moved, taken elsewhere taken to the punishment room and he deserved it he remembered what he was being put there for this time why he deserved it he deserved it he was going to be locked in the dark and the cold and—

The couch smelled like dog and felt somehow much coarser against his livewire nerves than it did when he just sat there normally, but it was soft it wasn't stone it wasn't cold this place didn't even *have* a punishment room Philza wasn't hurting him he wasn't even yelling—

Ranboo tried to focus, because even though he wasn't yelling he was still saying something and all Ranboo was hearing was blur.

Cloth pressed to his face. He was crying. His hands were still over his mouth. His knees were pulled up, tight, tail curled against his belly.

"I d—I, hhhfffs, I—"

"Shhhhh," Philza soothed, "Hugs help, right?"

Ranboo nodded, face pressed into the hand that dabbed at his tears, and Philza sat next to him on the couch and wrapped him up in two sets of limbs, wings hiding him from the world.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it just—came over me, it won't happen again I promise—"

"Shhhhhh, shshshsh, Ranboo, Ranboo hey." Philza pulled back, wings still draped over him but his hands now cupping Ranboo's face. He thumbed away fresh tears, looking directly at Ranboo in a way that was not helping with his distress. "Ranboo. Believe it or not I'm actually *glad* you stood up to me like that."

"What?" Ranboo asked, high pitched, and Philza started dabbing at his eyes again.

"You're expressing your opinions. Arguing. That's a *good* thing Ranboo. Obviously the things I tell you to do are things I want you to do, but you pushin' back is proof of you coming into your own."

"I—you—You *want* me to defy you?!"

"Within reason."

Ranboo grit his teeth, then gave in to the *wail* that tore out of him, fists in Philza's haori and head jerking down, pressed to Philza's chest.

"*WHY!?*"

“Ran—”

“Why is everything so *hard?!?*” he cried, sobs wracking him, “Why is everything you want me to do so *complicated!?*”

“Ohhh, Ranboo, Ranboo,” Philza crooned, arms drawing Ranboo closer and wings splayed across him. Between the kind touch and the aching tone, Ranboo *broke*. He wept, awful, ugly emotions clawing at the front of his throat like the damned in a river and he wished he could just get them *out* get them *out* of him he didn’t want these feelings he didn’t want the way they clogged his throat he was so sick of *crying* all the time! Was his face just cursed to weather burn marks indefinitely?

Philza pet at his back, his hair, and held him. Shushed him, soothed him, murmured soft “it’s okay”s and gentle “let it out”s.

Sometime, probably a *while*, later, Max shoved his snout up under Philza’s wings and into Ranboo’s crotch, which was the least awkward and generally best place that a dog can shove its muzzle. Really have to love that. Startled, Ranboo hiccupped on a sob, and tried to reorient despite the fact that he was still very much crying.

“He’s having a rough day,” Philza explained gently, and Ranboo looked up at him, then over his shoulder at Technoblade, who was home again, and approaching him, and laid his hand on Ranboo’s hair. He choked, then sobbed again loudly.

“Let it out, shhhh,” Philza soothed, thumbing at his shoulder.

He didn’t have much choice in the matter, really, the tears coming whether he wanted them to or not, clinging to Technoblade’s sleeve while the rest of him held onto Philza like a lifeline.

“What happened?” Technoblade asked softly, his strong hand petting down Ranboo’s hair and squeezing at the base of his skull.

“It’s hard,” Philza said sympathetically, squeezing Ranboo and pressing a kiss to his hair. “Everything is hard.”

Ranboo wailed, because *yes*, it *was*!

Technoblade crouched down on his haunches next to the couch, staring at Ranboo from beneath his mask, and thumbed at his cheeks, the sting making his already pinned ears jerk down even further for a moment.

“We’ll need to pick up more cactus. Maybe see if we can’t dig a greenhouse and grow some here. Foolish is only three, four hours by Nether from here?”

“We’d have to check,” Philza said noncommittally, pressing another brief kiss to the top of Ranboo’s head.

“We can make a day trip out of it. I’ll go see if I have any more downstairs.”

“Thanks,” Ranboo choked, the word strangled and followed by another bout of boo hoo hooing. God, he was such a child. Why couldn’t he get his act together for *once* in his life? Philza continued to hold him, continued to shush him, petting at his hair and back, and wiping at his tears

as Technoblade returned, caressed Ranboo briefly, sat at the crafting table, and set to work grinding another cactus into paste.

Ranboo calmed, with Philza soothing him and Max slobbering anxiously all over his face, while Technoblade worked. He'd nearly stopped crying when Technoblade brought over a fresh bowl and gently nudged Max out of the way so he could crouch down in front of Ranboo.

He leaned into the hand that Technoblade brushed against his face, warm and familiar, his breath stuttering and his shoulders hitching even as he hushed.

"You're okay," Technoblade soothed, and Ranboo nodded. He held still as Technoblade applied the paste, strong fingers gentle where they touched Ranboo's sensitive burns. His body occasionally twitched, hitched, aftershocks of his crying and nerve-bright pain jolting him minutely.

"You wanna tell Techno what brought this on?" Philza asked, sounding equal parts patient and amused. Even so, Ranboo's ears pinned back and his tail curled somehow tighter, his gaze on the ground.

"Not really."

Technoblade examined him, then turned to Philza, who chuckled.

"He argued with me."

"Oh, pog?"

"Just for a moment," Philza ruffled Ranboo's hair, "before all this, but he stood his ground for a whole second."

Shame and humiliation burned in the back of his throat, cheeks heated for two reasons. His eyes stung, threatening tears once more, but this time from embarrassment.

"That's good," Technoblade said, and despite himself, Ranboo's ears flicked up at the praise. Even through the shame. "What did you argue with him about?"

And Ranboo *didn't* want to say, didn't want to admit to it, but they were *pleased* with him for some reason and he'd been asked directly, so.

"I, I called him sir on purpose."

Technoblade barked out a laugh, dissolving into little giggles, his broad shoulders shaking and head ducked down. Ranboo wanted to *melt* into the floorboards, never to be seen again.

"That's *hilarious*," Technoblade said delightedly.

"It is, it really is," Philza agreed.

Ranboo made an unhappy noise, a petulant whine, hiding his face in his hands, and they laughed at him again. It prompted Technoblade to reach up and ruffle Ranboo's hair. "Sorry, sorry, we're not taking this very seriously huh?"

"I *defied* him—you!" Ranboo snapped his head out from behind his palms and looked between the two. They *weren't* taking this seriously at all!

“And it was pogchamp,” Philza said with a shrug. “Not the breaking down crying thing, after, that we feel sorry about, but we’re proud of you for gettin’ a bit of spine.”

“I have the spine of a chocolate eclair,” Ranboo grumbled, crossing his arms sullenly and thrashing his tail once. Ugh, why did his body always feel so tired and *heavy* after crying?

“And we’re sloooooowly buildin’ our way up from that,” Philza agreed, perky and affable.

Technoblade hummed in agreement, standing up and allowing Max to once again shove his snout all up in Ranboo’s business.

“Thanks, Max,” Ranboo said quietly, “You’re on my side with this, aren’t you boy?”

Max gave no response, tongue lolling and tail wagging with increasing force as Ranboo seemed less and less visibly distressed. Philza, however, snorted.

“You know that if you keep calling me ‘sir,’ I’m going to keep telling you to just call me Phil.”

“Phil’s stubborn; watch out.”

And Ranboo glanced at Philza’s face, grinning and amused. Then looked back down at Max between his hands, panting and wagging.

And he shouldn’t, because he’d just had a whole meltdown over it, and because these were good people who were good to him and he wanted to be good for them, and because defying Philza was horrifying and humiliating, and because a million other reasons. So he shouldn’t.

But.

“Yes *sir*.”

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who are interested, a couple things:

I have an adult-only [discord](#) you can join if you like (teens: I see you, I appreciate you, come back when you're older)

I crochet, and recently made a [Techno doll!](#) Phil's coming next, so be sure to follow if you wanna see more <3

As always, thank you so much for reading, and any thoughts/comments/concrit are welcome and valued <3 <3 <3

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNINGS FOR: Animal birth. It's not super graphic but it's not without its squeamishness either.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It started with missing socks.

Now, Ranboo was forgetful, so it was not strange in and of itself that belongings of his went missing. Just, that, the clothes were important to him, he had so *many* of them now but he still valued and cherished each article, gifts from his—whatever Technoblade and Philza were, to him. A lifetime of slavery and scarcity was not so easily forgotten, even by someone with a brain like his.

Then, during his quality time with Enderchest (and she'd grown very fond of him, though she still ran and hid every time Technoblade or Philza were near), he noticed that she had pale, thick spots of fluid along her teats, and his ears had gone flagpost upright at that.

“We should get her a nesting box,” Philza stated when Ranboo informed him and Technoblade, “Put some towels in there. That’s probably where your missing socks ran off to.”

Had Ranboo told Philza about his missing socks? He didn’t know. Apparently he did, since Philza knew.

“What, um, what’s a nesting box?”

Philza shrugged, passing him a potato and a peeler. Ranboo set to work alongside him, garlic and butter already simmering on the stove.

“Just what it sounds like. A little wooden box that she can stick all her nesting materials in for the birth. Someplace comfortable and warm. We’ll need to make sure there’s no draft under the bed; kittens can’t keep their body temperature up on their own so we’ll need to keep it warm. Maybe we can coax her into using the corner under the bed near the fireplace...”

The fireplace was in the middle of the room, which meant it wasn’t in the nice dark corner like Enderchest had preferred, but Ranboo saw the benefits of being closer to the fire, even if it meant she would be in arm’s reach of Ranboo if he decided to lay down on the floor and stick his hand under the bed.

Which, let’s be honest, he was absolutely going to do.

So after lunch, Ranboo made a box and filled it with the towels Technoblade handed him, tail wagging all the while. This was exciting. The babies were coming.

“It’s about time; you’ve been pregnant for ages,” Ranboo said gently as he slid the box underneath the bedpost, pressed up against the wall but in the corner near the fireplace. Enderchest twined around him, bunting him in the hips and waist and screaming at him, brushing her head against his hand and then sniffing and examining her offered gift. She walked into it, twirled around, sat and licked at the inside of her thigh for a quick second, then resumed screaming and demanding to be pet for three second intervals before she moved out of the way, then back in.

“You still don’t know how to be pet,” Ranboo remarked idly, scritchng at her cheek and then down her spine as she walked away, twirling his finger around her tail.

The next time he checked the nest, before they went to sleep that night, his socks were in amongst the towels. He smiled.

He smiled less when she didn’t eat the next morning, leaving the fish he offered entirely untouched.

“Is it just a bad fish?” Ranboo asked anxiously, not even realizing how he was clinging to Technoblade’s arm. “Like, is it rotten? Should I give her a different one?”

“I think appetite changes are normal for animals about to give birth,” Technoblade said, calm and unruffled. “I think we have a book on animal husbandry in the library somewhere we could check, if you want to make sure.”

Ranboo *did* want to make sure, actually! He wanted to make very sure.

So the two returned to the top floor, Enderchest mewng at the sight of Ranboo and hissing and darting into her box when Technoblade followed. They looked through the bookshelves and Technoblade found it first, a thicker encyclopedia with worn edges.

Ranboo plastered himself against Technoblade’s side, reading over his shoulder (literally, he was tall like that), and clinging to his arm. He was practically in the man’s lap, tail draped over Technoblade’s thigh and legs curled in close. He watched Technoblade flip to the table of contents, then brush through pages with his thumb with a satisfying fwipfwipfwipfwipfwip until he got to the page number indicated. Ranboo tried to skim over the information on housecats, but Technoblade skimmed faster than he did and flipped through a few more pages until he brought a pink-tinted finger down twice against the passage header, “Basics of Pregnancy and Birth in the Cat.”

Mammary secretions, nesting behavior, increased hostility or affection depending on bond with the caretaker, assorted behavioral changes, licking, pacing, yowling, and, *ah!* Changes in appetite.

“See?” Technoblade asked, reaching a hand up to scratch at Ranboo’s hair, making him vwoop quietly and wag just a little, relief and affection pouring through his bloodstream. “She’s just stressed with pre-birth jitters. She’ll get her appetite back once the kittens are out.”

“Mmmm,” he hummed, because words. Hhh. Hard.

Ranboo was ashamed to admit that he did not actually get a lot of work done, between making the nesting box and the birth itself. He took care of Ranmoo, of course he took care of Ranmoo, she was his responsibility and he loved her and brushing down her hide/hair/fur/he-still-didn’t-know-what-it-was-called was soothing, and he was hyped up and kind of in need of soothing. So of course he took care of Ranmoo. When Philza or Technoblade prompted him to come down and help make food or just plain eat, he listened.

But they mostly left him to his own devices, and his own devices wanted to lay down on the floor and stare at Enderchest.

He meticulously recorded every single thing that happened in his memory book. He also copied down some information from the encyclopedia Technoblade had left out into his instruction book, just in case Enderchest ever got pregnant again.

Two days after first displaying symptoms, Enderchest went into labor. She was pacing, yowling, licking at herself, and didn't stop howling until Ranboo was there on the floor, tail curled against the wood and ears unable to decide if they should pin back or flare up. Ranboo's heart was in his throat, his body tense in a way that was almost familiar, except it wasn't fear. He was excited, every muscle tightly coiled in *anticipation*, and he had to remind himself to take normal breaths.

"I'm here," he reassured her, though he wasn't sure if the meaning of his words went through. "I'm right here with you, you're gonna be just fine."

The actual birth itself was... gross. If Ranboo was being entirely honest. Objectively fascinating and he couldn't—even if he wanted to—look away. But also. Gross. Lots of bodily fluids, lots of Enderchest putting her tongue on things that tongues probably were not meant to go on. For people, that was. For cats he guessed it was normal.

Did you know that cats eat the placentas? Gross! Ranboo guessed it was a good way to cycle nutrients back into her system but! Ew! He didn't blink, he was so focused on watching.

The kittens were ugly-cute, which, he guessed he expected. They *were* newborns, after all, eyes still shut and tiny bodies seeking out Enderchest's teats. There were two of them.

Holy and Nether, there were two whole new baby kittens that were alive and breathing and nursing and *existed* and he'd watched it happen and—

Ranboo's eyes stung, but he resolved not to cry. He didn't want to be in any sort of pain when he was witnessing something so very magic and grotesquely beautiful and—

"I told you you left them in the pot for too long," he joked wetly, attempting to lighten his mood. "Look at them, they're all burnt."

And it was true, they were black little babies. One of them had white spots along its underbelly and cute little socks, but the other was just as pitch black as its mama.

And that thought only threatened to make Ranboo cry harder. He swiped at his eyes, using his sleeve to save his hands from burning, and laughed. "Ohhhh nooo, now I'm getting all weepy. Look what you've done, Enderchest, this is all your fault."

Enderchest was impassive to his tears.

"I wonder if you've done this before," Ranboo pondered idly, adjusting so he was laying a little more on his side on the floor, head pillowed on a wrist. "The encyclopedia says first time mothers can be more stressed and have problems, but you're acting like you know exactly what you're doing."

Ranboo placed a hand on the floor, just underneath the bed, close to the box but not touching her or her babies. Ranboo wasn't exactly brave enough to try that yet, and they were new. They should

stick close to their mama.

“You’re very smart, though, so I wouldn’t be surprised if you just know what you’re doing anyway.”

He was relieved when, that evening, he placed another fish in front of her and she immediately began to eat it, her babies asleep at her belly.

“I’m glad you have your appetite back,” Ranboo remarked, “I was worried about you. I’ve never tried to take care of a cat with newborns before. But now look at you, you have your own kittens to look out for. They’re small and dependent on you, and you’re going to take very good care of them, just like I’m going to try my best to watch out for you.”

Philza chuckled behind him, and Ranboo jerked up to sitting. He hadn’t heard him come up the ladder, so focused was he on getting Enderchest to eat.

Philza’s hand slid strong fingers through Ranboo’s hair, petting at him, and Ranboo leaned his face into the touch, tail swishing. “We’ll all look out for each other,” Philza said, squeezing just below Ranboo’s ear before he squatted down to peer under the bed himself.

“How many did she end up having?” he asked, and Ranboo *did* hear Technoblade climbing up the ladder.

“Two, sir,” Ranboo said happily. “I haven’t tried to touch them yet.”

“Good, don’t,” Technoblade said, ruffling Ranboo’s hair as he passed by. “Kittens are fragile.”

“We’ll wait about a week, we can touch them then.” Philza tugged on Ranboo’s ear. “And call me Phil.”

Ranboo chuckled, tail twitch-twitch-twitching with jittery nerves that weren’t quite fear, and turned his attention back to Enderchest to resume watching her. He waited until she was done eating, cleared out the fishbones, and stuck them in his inventory rather than go downstairs to chuck them out. Technoblade and Philza were ready for bed. He should just get dressed in his nightclothes and not make them wait on him.

He vwooped happily as Technoblade pulled him into a hug under the covers, burrowing in. The familiar weight of Philza’s wing settled over him and he sighed contentedly.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to name them?” Philza asked, and Ranboo hummed thoughtfully.

“Jjjjjj Jeffery.”

“Jeffery?” Philza echoed with a little chuckle. Ranboo bit his lip, and pressed his forehead further against Technoblade’s chest.

“No. Jjjjjj Jeffery. You have to pronounce it that way.”

Philza and Technoblade both laughed, Ranboo’s own nervous giggling joining them. His heart fluttered at being silly and insistent, but he felt good. Happy. Daring. Enderchest had successfully had her kittens and Ranboo’d been running his mouth calling Philza “sir” for days on end now.

“I don’t think I’m going to do that,” Technoblade snorted.

“You have to, that’s its name.”

“Nahhh, nah nah nah nah nah.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to intentionally mispronounce a cat’s name like that,” Ranboo said, mock offended, playful, his chest a tight-wound knot that he would have the *gall* to say that sort of thing to *Technoblade*, but Technoblade only snorted.

“I can’t believe you named a cat Jeffery with seven j’s.”

Oh, yeah, how would Ranboo even spell that? With seven j’s, he guessed.

“And the second one is…” Ranboo pondered that, idly reaching up to gently stroke a finger down one of Philza’s feathers. “Enderpearl. Like its mama.”

Phil snorted lightly into the back of Ranboo’s skull. “You have fascinating names, mate.”

Ranboo hummed, tucking the blanket in a little closer to his chin, and twined his tail around Philza’s ankle.

On day six after the birth, Ranboo, Philza, and Technoblade all sat next to the bed and Ranboo carefully extracted the first kitten, the little white-spotted one with socks.

“They’re so small,” he breathed reverently, trying to hold the kitten strongly enough that it couldn’t wriggle out of his grasp, mewing high and tiny and surprisingly *loud*, but not so tightly that he could hurt the baby. He handed it over to Philza, who gently flipped it over and inspected it while Ranboo pulled out the second kitten, Enderchest walking out to sniff warily at Technoblade and Philza from a distance. She hissed once, then laid herself down to loaf near Ranboo’s knee.

“This one’s a boy,” Philza announced, thumbing at his little cheek before handing him over to Technoblade, who very carefully and very gently cupped him between his hands.

“He’ll be Jjjjjjjeffery then,” Ranboo said, holding the all-black kitten against his chest. “And you’ll be Enderpearl.”

Jjjjjjjeffery let out an *extra* loud mew, hissing blindly with closed eyes and Technoblade chuckled. “I’m sorry, I know it’s a stupid name, I tried to talk him out of it.”

“Hey,” Ranboo pouted, Enderpearl wiggling in his hands. He handed it over to Philza, who gently flipped and examined before announcing, “I thiiiiiiink this one’s a girl. Easier to tell with the boys but.” Philza handed Enderpearl back over to Ranboo, who cuddled her back to his chest. Her *very pointy* little kitten claws dug briefly into his hands and shirt, attempting to maneuver herself, but she was very blind and very small and Ranboo could feel his tail thumping against the floorboards. Technoblade handed Jjjjjjjeffery back over to Philza, who let him sniff him and traded with Ranboo, only to pass her over to Technoblade.

“You need to let her smell you too.”

“She sleeps under our bed, she can smell me just fine,” he grouched, stroking one *very* gentle finger lightly down Enderpearl’s nose and forehead.

The small window of time that Philza recommended they hold the kittens for flashed by in a blink, and Ranboo pet Enderchest very briefly (prompting her to get up, scold him, and return to her little nest) before settling Jjjjjjeffery and Enderpearl back up against her.

They made a routine out of this for the next few days, Ranboo always being the one to first separate them from Enderchest and Philza and Technoblade taking turns holding them. Socializing them, Philza called it, getting them used to people and handling.

“Why haven’t they opened their eyes yet?” Ranboo asked, observing how the slits of their eyes actually were starting to look kind of... goopy.

Philza and Technoblade leaned over his shoulders, Jjjjjjeffery in between his crossed legs and Enderpearl held in his hands.

“Looks like Con—Conjub—hm,” Philza cut himself off. “I can’t remember the word for it. It’s fairly common for barn cats and strays, though. We’ll dilute some ghastr tears to dropper in, and wipe off the gunk with a warm cloth a couple times a day.”

“And that’ll help?” Ranboo asked anxiously.

“Sure. They’ll also grow out of it naturally, but it’s nicer for ‘em if we help it out. I knew a woman where all her barn cats’ kittens would get this; it’s just something that happens.”

“So, so it’s not, dangerous? Or bad?”

“Well it’s not good,” Philza snorted. “But nah, they’re gaining weight and breathing fine, with a bit of help it’ll clear up in a few days.”

“I can get more ghastr tears,” Technoblade offered. “What do we need to dilute them with?”

Philza blew out, lips motorboating as he looked up and to the right. “Ahhhh, water and... powdered moss I think?”

“Sounds about right,” Technoblade said with a shrug, sliding down the ladder. Ranboo watched him go, then turned anxiously back to the kittens in his lap.

“They’ll be fine,” Philza assured, taking a seat on the floor next to Ranboo, “It’s not fatal, and it’s not incurable. It’s just annoying for a few days. Then their eyes’ll be open and they’ll be *fine*.”

Ranboo nodded, and leaned against Philza. Well. Not really “leaned” so much as “touched shoulders” but it counted.

Philza and Technoblade had to take care of the wiping part, since the rags were damp with water, and Philza was the one certain enough in what he was doing to actually dropper in the diluted ghastr tears. Well, Technoblade would have been capable, Ranboo was certain, because everything Technoblade did was very purposeful and competent and cool and admirable, but he didn’t want to. And Ranboo wasn’t confident in his abilities at all. So. Philza did it.

Ranboo pet Enderchest as he watched, the little lady too tired to do her usual walkabouts as he pet her. She would still occasionally flick her head out from under his palm, meowing at him, and then, a few seconds later, meow again with a bonk against his knuckles. So.

“Ranboo, I don’t think your cat knows how to be pet,” Technoblade mentioned.

“That’s what I keep telling her!” he agreed brightly.

Philza returned the newly-cleaned kittens to the box, Enderchest tolerating it sullenly. She hissed at Philza’s hand once her babies were back in their places, Philza laughing at her.

“She’s a feisty one,” he remarked.

Nothing like me, Ranboo thought, humming an affirmation.

Within a few days, they *did* see improvement, and the kittens opened their eyes as well. About a week after they’d first seen the gunk, it had all cleared up.

Ranboo hovered more than he’d like to admit, laying with the cats while they napped for untold amounts of time. Technoblade and Philza never begrudged him for it, though. He took care of Ranmoo and he helped make food and they didn’t ask him to help with much more than that.

To be fair, their current projects involved travelling by Nether to the desert for more cactus, and redstone... stuff, neither of which Ranboo *wanted* to involve himself with or really *should*, so there was good reason for them to not ask for his help.

He still went out and looked over their little patch of farmland and played fetch with Max and brought them supplies as they constructed a bee/greenhouse, because he’d get bored doing *nothing* but staring at sleeping cats all day, but he didn’t go mining at all for *weeks*, and, well. He uh. Probably wouldn’t have gone logging even without the kittens, so.

He didn’t know why he sucked at that so much.

Ranmoo and Carl had gotten used to each other, so she now roamed as freely as he did, within the outermost fencing. She was willing to graze at rougher patches of scrub than he was, Technoblade occasionally complaining about the lush tastes of his horse, and Max was overjoyed to be able to prance about both their hocks at once.

Max was *also* very delighted, just shy of a month after the kittens were born, to meet them. Ranboo hovered less and played with them more, enjoying the way they were still a little wobbly and how ready they were to throw down with every single inanimate object that caught them off guard. He could relate. To the off-guard, part, not the throwing down part. He was *not* even half as feisty as these handfuls of fur were, hah, just, sometimes he forgot that there was a loadstone with a brewing stand on it just inside the door and it would startle him—anyway.

They’d constructed a cage that would hold the kittens and Enderchest, who was now more or less on good terms with Technoblade and Philza, but still favored Ranboo the best. Ranboo lowered the cage into Technoblade’s waiting hands, who set them down on the couch.

“Okay, Phil,” Technoblade said when Ranboo had scampered down the ladder and was seated next to them, tail twitching nervously.

Philza opened the front door, hand firm around Max’s collar, and kept a tight grip on him as he slowly allowed Max to approach the crate. Enderchest, unsurprisingly, hissed loudly at him. But, also, she’d been living just a floor above him for some time by that point, and recognized his smell as much as he recognized hers. Max sniffed them through the bars, Enderchest grumbling and Max’s tail wagging delightedly.

The kittens didn't seem to know what to make of Max. On one hand, their mama was displeased. On the other, he was new and therefore exciting. On the *third* hand, or, well, paw, Ranboo guessed, kittens were well known for being absolutely willing to throw down with all things, always, and Jjjjjjeffery *did* try to swipe a paw out to claw at Max's nose.

"Hey now, play nice," Ranboo scolded gently, reaching into the cage and pulling Jjjjjjeffery's little paw back inside. "Max just wants to be your friend, see?"

They worked on socializing the kittens, Max, and Enderchest once a day from there out, sometimes all three of them, sometimes just Ranboo and Technoblade or Ranboo and Philza while the third went off to do other things.

On one such day, Ranboo and Philza were at the couch, Philza remarking that they might just be ready to let Max and Enderchest meet without the bars here soon, when both their communicators lit up.

"So I have good news and bad news," Technoblade said over the line.

"What's the bad news?" Philza asked immediately, concern mild, but Ranboo could see the way he was tensing up, feathers rising, ready to spring into action if his friend needed him.

"I have been to two villages beyond our own, and both village clerics say they're not really capable of making blessed bells and we're going to have to go to an actual city, if we want one of those."

Philza snorted, his feathers smoothing back down, "Still going on about that?"

"Phil, I am religious."

Philza tapped the side of his communicator, muting himself for a moment. "More like superstitious," he whispered, winking at Ranboo.

"I can hear you making snide comments behind my back."

"Who, me?"

"And, uh, what's the good news?" Ranboo asked, biting down a chuckle at Technoblade's expense. His tail wagged surreptitiously against the couch cushions.

"I bought a boyfriend for Ranmoo. His name is Bob."

"Oh, pogchamp," Philza remarked.

"We'll put the kittens away and come meet him," Ranboo agreed, excited. *Two* whole cows!? Technoblade had bought Bob, but Ranboo hoped he would still be the one primarily charged with his care.

The bull was a handsome fellow with very long eyelashes and elegant horns. Ranboo held out a plain red apple in greeting, nervous and excited, as Ranmoo plodded towards her old, smaller paddock with curiosity for the newcomer.

"I got him because he was specifically mild-mannered," Technoblade informed, Ranboo petting down Bob's neck. "We still probably shouldn't pick any *fights* with him, but he'll make for good breeding stock."

Ranboo hopped up on Bob's back and draped his limbs over the sides floppily, grinning, tail wagging.

Technoblade ruffled a hand through Ranboo's hair, Ranboo leaning into it. "You sound happy."

Oh, he was vocalizing! He nodded. "I've been meaning to, ah, find Ranmoo a boyfriend. It was, um, one of my personal projects? Except, I haven't been very good about focusing on those."

"That's alright," Technoblade said with a shrug. "Your projects, you decide how much you wanna work on 'em."

"Are you—are you, um, going to," Ranboo crawled up higher along Bob's back, straddling him, Technoblade's hand knocked loose from his hair to slip down to his shoulder, then off. "Can I, be the one who watches over him?"

"I would be interested in that, yes," Technoblade said. "I'm honestly not much for cow care."

Ranboo beamed.

"Fortunately we've got someone who is," Philza said, perched on a fence post, standing with impressive balance as Ranmoo leaned over the paddock fencing and sniffed at the new member of their little area. Bob plodded over to say hello to her, too, both of them displaying positive body language.

Ranboo smiled at them, and at Philza, and at Technoblade, and felt twitchy and excited and happy. He felt like Max, who was sniffing his darndest, and looked just about ready to launch himself over the paddock fencing in order to come say hello. Ranboo giggled, slipped off Bob's back, and hopped over the fence so he could sit with Max and bury his hands in Max's fur.

"You're meeting all kinds of new critters, aren't you boy?" Ranboo asked, his and Max's tails occasionally thumping into each other as they sat there and wagged.

"Exciting time to be a dog," Philza agreed, Twitch flying over from whatever they'd been off doing to settle on his shoulder, cawing loudly.

"Were you followin' Techno around?" he asked them, pulling his hands from inside his sleeves and stroking a finger up their breastfeathers. "Or were you actually out looking for food like a regular animal that hasn't been spoiled fuckin' rotten?"

"Techno!"

Philza sighed, chuckling breathily, and tapped their beak. "You're so spoiled. Huh? You are so so spoiled." Philza pressed little kisses to the side of them, making them floof up and beak him on the nose.

Ranboo chuckled and got up to go pet at Bob again, then climbed up on Ranmoo's back, fidgety and with his attention darting about, ears perked high and tail tip twitching.

"You're excited," Philza remarked.

"Yessir."

"Call me Phil."

“No sir.”

Technoblade laughed, petting at Max, and tossed a stick for him to go chase. “Alright, I’m gonna go sit by the fire for a bit.”

“I’ll come with,” Philza said agreeably, hopping off his fencepost with a brief flare of his wings—aaaahaha, jittery energy + looking at his eyespots all of a sudden = weird and bad, don’t do that—and Ranboo waved goodbye with a warbling trill that wasn’t entirely pleasant but his good mood was bouncing back near-instantly, with Philza’s wings refolded. When Max brought the stick back over Ranboo wrestled it out with a broad grin. He could honestly use the outlet for all his happy energy as well, to be honest, so he was glad to play with him.

It occurred to Ranboo, when his fingers were starting to go numb with cold and the yard was a mess of excited pawprints, that. He was.

At peace.

Like, genuinely?

Sure, he still *desperately* wanted Technoblade and Philza’s approval, and did *not* want to piss them off. He still fussed over the kittens and Ranmoo and it was very easy for his brain to come up with scenarios and ways for things to go wrong. He didn’t think he’d ever be totally rid of his ever-pervasive anxiety, or the ominous cloud that haunted what should have been memories.

But he was breathing hard from an exertion that he chose and watching his breath mist a cloud in front of him, well dressed and well fed in a place that was safe, and he.

Huh.

He hadn’t even panicked, recently. Not since, not since the first “sir” fight, and that hadn’t even been a full-blown attack as much as a mental breakdown.

Max chuffed at him, play-bowing, but Ranboo dropped the stick in favor of kneeling down into the snow and petting at Max with playful roughness. Max responded in kind, wriggling up into Ranboo’s lap and licking at his face no matter which way Ranboo twisted and turned and tried to duck away from the dog slobber, laughing.

Things were *stable* here. He knew what to expect, even without checking his memory book. He had a routine, loose and easily-changed but a sweet assurance that he treasured. He knew every single person he interacted with, because there were two of them. And he knew how to stay on their good sides, and did not fear their violent mood swings, because their good sides were ever-expansive and they didn’t *have* mood swings, violent or otherwise.

He was, he was—*happy*, it felt like.

Yeah. Yeah, he was pretty sure. He nodded to himself, getting a noseful of dog fur. Yeah. That sounded—right, actually. He was happy, here. Not just like, momentary happiness, he’d been experiencing that more times than he ever thought possible since Technoblade had rescued him. But happy like bone-deep happy. Happy like sitting in front of the fire after hours outside and feeling warmth slowly sink into the parts of you that you hadn’t even realized were cold.

Ranboo let loose an open-mouthed breath, watching the steam cloud like dragon's smoke. He wasn't sure how long he'd have, with this happiness. He'd already had it for far longer than he'd expected. But he resolved to cherish it, as long as he could.

Chapter End Notes

Comments/concrit/feedback always valued and appreciated!

The word Phil couldn't remember is Conjunctivitis

To anyone who enjoyed my Technodoll, you may find yourself enjoying [Crochetza](#)

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

And now, for the visitors you've all been waiting for!

CW: So the thing about aging Fundy way down means he's at a point in his life before he fully conceptualizes gender, so he hasn't transitioned yet in this fic. Obviously in a few years when he comes out Will's gonna be nothing but supportive and whatnot, but for this fic people are using she/her for him.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo just had to jinx it, the peace and tranquility and routine. By observing and appreciating them, of course he jinxed them.

At least it wasn't... *bad*?

He was cleaning out the fireplaces, ash from their ever-burning fires collecting and collecting and piling up and up and up until finally Technoblade sighed and said someone should deal with it, and Ranboo had offered. (Philza had, in the same moment, held a finger to his nose and claimed “Not it!”). Ranboo’d gotten back into the swing of mining regularly, with the kittens no longer demanding constant supervision. Well. Uh. Or, y’know, less that they demanded it, and more that Ranboo felt like he’d die if he didn’t give it. But anyway! Ever since Max and the cats had been allowed to interact with each other outside of the crate, Ranboo had... eased off. But even so, it was nice to take a break from his once-again-routine mining.

Philza and Technoblade were out on a hunt, Max and Twitch with them, since meat was just about the only thing where they didn’t have chests and chests full of excess. Ranboo had a cloth tied over his nose and mouth, vocalizing quietly to himself as he scooped out the ash on his knees. He paused, checked his notebook, flipping to early pages and skimming over them.

Oh, *Carnation*! He remembered her! Oh, the little stray he used to feed stolen kitchen scraps, oh, he hadn’t thought of her in *ages*! He hoped she’d found someone else to love her, since he wasn’t there anymore. But that wasn’t what he’d opened his memory book for, right? Why was he in the early pages? None of this was relevant anymore—

Wait no, right right right right right, he wanted to know if he used to clean out fireplaces a lot as one of his chores, since he had to do a lot of the non-watery stuff. Well, all of his chores were non-watery, just that, he wasn’t *solely* responsible for them.

Oh, yeah, there, he’d cleaned out fireplaces at *least* once before. He nodded to himself with a “hmm,” then stowed his memory book back in his inventory.

He wondered where Philza and Technoblade were, as he got back into it. They’d been off hunting for a while, and he knew they were lethally accurate. Right? How long did hunts usually take? How

much meat were they trying to bring back? He'd saved the main floor fireplace for last, which meant he was practically done. It felt like they should be back soon.

He glanced up when the door opened, mouth open beneath the cloth to mention how he was *just* thinking about where they were, then launched up to his feet and back a step.

That wasn't Philza. It definitely wasn't Technoblade.

"Uh."

"Um."

They stared at each other.

The man, brunette with wavy curls, large glasses perched on a tall face, three different layers beneath his brown coat, and a large bundle resting against his hip, glanced down at the compass hung from a thin chain around his neck. He glanced then towards the—brewing stands? Oh, no, the lodestone in the corner, Ranboo had forgotten that was even there. He took two steps forward, eyes back on the compass, and gave himself a tiny, perplexed nod.

"Is this Phil's house?" he asked, attention back on Ranboo, who jumped at the stranger's voice.

"Uh, yes?"

"Oh, good!" He kicked the door shut behind him, moving the large cloth bundle from one hip to the other. He strode into the cabin like he lived there (which he did NOT)(wait, did he?)(Ranboo should check his memory book)(wait, no, he'd just asked if Philza lived here, of course he was new, he was brand new, Ranboo didn't know this guy). "I have to say, it was a real bitch to find this place, and it's so damn cold up here. I thought Technoblade swore off snowy biomes after what happened in the south? Anyway," the man set the bundle down gently on the couch, and it occurred to Ranboo belatedly that there was a *child* in there, "I don't think I've heard of you! Did you start living with them before or after the move?"

"The, move?"

The man gestured vaguely about his head. To the whole cabin? Ranboo thought?

"You know, out here in the middle of fucking nowhere."

Ranboo stared at the edge of his hat. He could, ah, feel his hands start shaking. They hadn't done that in a while.

"Uh."

The man stared at him, tilted his head, and then bulldozed on. "Either way, it's nice to meet you. You do live here with them, right? Or just with him? Does Technoblade live here? I know they were trying out separate houses for a while there, though honestly I can't imagine he would've been able to move this far out without Technoblade coming with him. What's your name?"

Oh, Ranboo knew that one!

"Ranboo, sir."

“Aww, that’s so polite! Tell me Ranboo, where’re they keeping the tea stuff nowadays because I am *frigid*.”

Ranboo watched him approach the stove with the unflappable calmness of a man acting entirely within his own right.

“A-ah, um, what, kind, do you want?” Ranboo stuttered out, wiping his hands down the sooty apron on his front and opening the chest that had the tea bags.

“Do they have any hibiscus?”

They did, though neither Technoblade or Philza ever drank it. Or, maybe they did. Ranboo was pretty sure they didn’t, but, well. Memory. Remembering things. Who was this man? Ranboo pulled a tea bag out and watched him fill the tea kettle from a safe distance, every alarm bell in his brain screaming that the human was going to swing his arm in a large arc and splash water all over him. Who *was* this guy!?

“Um, wh—”

“So Ranboo tell me about yourself!” he demanded cheerily as he placed the kettle on the heating stove. “Who are you, how’d you come to live with—”

“Oh, great.”

“Techno!” he cried delightedly, immediately leaving the stove to go greet Technoblade with outstretched arms. Max sniffed briefly at the bundled child, then investigated the stranger with a cautious wag of his tail, and Ranboo watched as Technoblade accepted a hug from the human.

So. Not, not a *bad* thing, Ranboo guessed, that he was inside. And. Uh.

Ranboo slipped the tea bag into the kettle.

“Techno, it’s so good to see you! My communicator broke a while back so I’ve completely missed out on what’s going on in your life! You’ve moved, and oh, I met your new roommate. Ranboo, right?”

Ranboo stiffened under their attention, and nodded. “And you are...?”

“Brothers,” the man chimed, saccharine and too-cheerful, in the same breath that Technoblade stonily stated, “Associates.”

So that was *great* and *not confusing at all*. Ranboo held a fist up to his mask and delicately coughed, attempting to work up the nerve, but they left no gap for him to speak.

“Twins, really, can’t you see the similarities?”

“Stop telling people we’re twins literally *no one* has ever bought the idea that we are twins!”

“Sure they have, we’re just like, twins separated by a decade and a half who also happen to look nothing alike; other than that we’re *identical*.”

“That’s not how twins even work!” Technoblade’s voice was doing the pitch-up thing it did when he was bamboozled or otherwise frustrated. Ranboo was *experiencing anxiety*.

“Aaaah, I actually think that’s exactly how twins work Technoblade,” he asserted, his own voice going high there at the start, “Maybe you should go read a book or something—”

“Oh you *little* goblin!” Technoblade stalked towards the man, who laughed and danced away merrily, Max woofing once in his *excitement*. Ranboo *wished he could relate!!!*

“What’s the matter Techno you look a little upset there!” he laughed, bright and twinkling and with *no* regard for the seven-foot pig-hybrid stalking after him like he was his next meal. Ranboo carefully side-stepped away from the stove with its hot water and hot coil and made himself very small and very quiet in the corner next to the fireplace, which he wasn’t even done cleaning out, and now Technoblade had the man in a headlock and was knuckling his hat clean off and oh boy! Oh!! Boy!!!

The door downstairs clicked open.

“*Phil!* Come collect your weasel!”

“Will!”

“Dad!”

Oh!

Ranboo opened up his memory book. Oh! Wilbur!! Okay, okay, Ranboo was—okay! Okay, okay okay, that made sense. Ohhh, that made so much more sense now! That was, that was a relief.

Ranboo watched Philza all but fling himself up the ladder and Wilbur was released just in time for Philza to pull him into a hug. Twitch fluttered up through the hatch shortly after, perching on Wilbur’s shoulder and cawing, “Little shit! Little shit!!!!”

Ohhhhhkay, Ranboo was okay. Okay. And now, hey, look at that, he didn’t even have to ask what the guy’s name was, Philza had said it out loud. That was nice. Yeah, that was good. That was very helpful. Ranboo appreciated that. He nodded to himself with a quiet “hmm,” Philza was so good like that, he liked him a lot, Ranboo was okay.

“Ranboo!” Ranboo’s head snapped up, heart leaping into his throat, though Philza looked nothing short of delighted, “Come meet my boy!”

“We’ve met! We’ve met, he’s very nice, he’s very polite.”

Philza burst out in gleeful little airy chuckles. “Yeah, reeeaal polite fucker he is.”

“Oh?”

Ranboo felt his cheeks flush and ears pin back. Nooo, no no no, he didn’t, he didn’t want—Philza and Technoblade knowing that he insisted on calling Philza “sir” was one thing, but, he didn’t—he didn’t know this man, he didn’t want Wilbur to get the wrong idea, he—

Technoblade’s shadow fell over him and Ranboo glanced up, at the familiar skull mask, the familiar cape, the familiar breadth of his shoulders, the reassuring familiarity of him.

“He’s a bit high strung, give him a moment,” Philza was saying, but Technoblade’s arm was open and Ranboo’s face was in the fur of his cape and he was breathing he was taking deep breaths he

wasn't panicking or embarrassed or freaking out he was fine he was fine he was fine Technoblade was warm and solid and holding him and he was *fine*.

He was fine.

Okay.

He was acting like a free person. And he'd been doing okay with it lately! As long as he didn't ask for help or need direction and he shoved down his fears and didn't kneel or grovel, he was fine! He was acting like a free person, he *was*, he wasn't begging for their guidance or assistance, because free people didn't need those and he only sometimes needed held and comforted like a panicky, neurotic pet because he *wasn't* a pet and he wasn't a slave and he wasn't going to act like one he was going to push away from Technoblade's warm arms and inviting scent and he was going to make himself smile at the stranger and Philza who were *talking* about him and he was *fine* with them talking about him because he was *free* and he was *acting* like it and he wasn't going to panic and he wasn't going to need babied or held and he was *fine*.

"Sorry," he said, mouth and throat feeling dry. He swallowed compulsively. Oh, he was still wearing the cloth, they couldn't see him smile anyway. "Just, needed a second. Um. It's nice to meet you, Wilbur?"

"Nice to meet you too!" he said cheerily, apparently entirely unbothered by Ranboo's little mini-freakout.

"Mate, where have you been!?" Philza asked, reaching up and cupping Wilbur's face in his hands. "None of my messages have been getting through!"

Oh, oh no.

"Yeah, my communicator broke a while back and I haven't had time to make the trip out to you to sync yours up with my new one until now."

Technoblade's front, he'd—soot and ash all over him, grey streaks against the red and in the white fluff of his neckline.

"How in the shit do you break a *communicator*!? Those things are fucking indestructable!"

Technoblade's hand in his hair, skritchingly lightly. "It'll wash out," murmured quietly, reassuringly. Ranboo nodded. He was fine he was fine he was *fine*.

"Would you believe me if I told you a pair of teenagers did it?"

Philza laughed, bright and loud and so incredibly fond it emanated from his every molecule.

"You're a piece of work," he said, mussing Wilbur's hair. He then turned to the couch. "And who's this?"

"Oh, the reason I'm here, actually!" Wilbur said, animated and smiling broadly. "Philza Minecraft," he said, scooping up the bundle with extraordinary gentleness (particularly when contrasted with how *whirlwind* the rest of his actions were), "you are a grandfather."

There was a beat of absolute silence, and then Philza let out a small "Wh—" as he looked between the slumbering child and his son's smiling face. He let out a breathy, nearly-soundless gasp of

laughter and took the bundle from Wilbur's arms, his feathers fluffed and a small trill resounding from the back of his throat.

Huh. Ranboo didn't know he could do that.

"Meet Fundy," Wilbur said, voice pitched lower and quieter, radiating pride. "I found her face down in a puddle on the side of the road."

Both Philza and Technoblade *burst* into raucous laughter, Ranboo's tail fluffing out, the child in Philza's arms stirring and letting out a high pitched yawn.

"Oh fuck, she's *obviously* one of ours then!"

"At that point I think it'd be counterpoint to the universe if you *didn't* adopt her," Technoblade agreed around his own laughter. Ranboo looked between the three men (and child, he guessed), confused but the air in the cabin was once again happy and his own anxiety had simmered down. So. He didn't need to understand totally in order for his tail to cautiously twitch at their laughter.

"Ranboo, for context," Technoblade called, beckoning Ranboo closer, "Face down in a puddle on the side of the road is how Phil found Will."

"You were there too you know, Technoblade."

"I deny any and all involvement in your upbringing."

"God you're such a *dickhead* you know that?"

"Rich, coming from you."

"At least I can admit when I'm being an arse, you just—"

"One of the many reasons I deny all involvement in your upbringing."

"You just keep going on and *on* all 'oh look at me I'm Technoblade I'm so smart and cool and a good fighter and I don't have feelings uwu!'"

"I don't sound like that."

"That's exactly how you sound like. All the time every day."

"I do not uwu. Don't hit me with that uwu non—ohhhhhh noooo, Chat, nooooo. Oh Will look what you've done ohhhhh."

"HA!"

Philza was now sitting down on the couch, child slowly blinking and wriggling loose of her confines in his lap, laughing so hard it seemed to Ranboo that he couldn't breathe properly anymore.

Ranboo did have to admit, this was kind of funny.

"Fundy! Hey baby, you up?" Wilbur said, distracted from his banter with Technoblade and tone going sweeter and gentler, though still abright with buzzing energy.

Fundy nodded, frowning with the attempt to get an arm up out of the bundling.

“Here, let’s get you a little more comfortable,” Philza said, tears in the corners of his eyes and laughter still lingering in his tone. Philza set to unwrapping Fundy’s swaddling, Ranboo removing his own apron and facecloth and skittering over towards him to sit stiffly down on the couch next to him. Ranboo watched as Technoblade once again wrestled Wilbur into a headlock.

Oh boy.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Philza said, and Ranboo glanced over to the little fox-hybrid in his lap. Actually, getting adopted off the side of the road *would* explain why Philza was a bird-hybrid and Wilbur looked to be entirely human, as near as Ranboo could tell. Fundy looked more fox than human, if Ranboo was being honest with himself. Really, the clothes and the thumbs and the bipedal spine were the only giveaways, and Ranboo bet she could drop to all fours if a situation called for it.

“Hi.”

“I’m Phil; I’m your grandpa.”

“Oh.” Fundy looked Philza up and down, twisted around to look at Wilbur, who was now half-draped over Technoblade’s arm and wiggling in earnest, and then pointed at Wilbur with a wide-eyed look back up at Philza.

“Yeah, I’m Wilbur’s dad.”

Fundy nodded, face furrowed in with all the intense concentration of small children, and then nodded again, seemingly having reached a conclusion. Fundy then looked up at Ranboo, and pointed again with another look back at Philza.

“That’s Ranboo. He’s a friend who lives here with me and Technoblade. Techno’s the funny big man playing with your dad.”

Fundy nodded one final time, then hopped out of Philza’s lap and trotted over to the chests along the back wall, opening one and shoving both hand and snout immediately into its contents.

“Woah now!” Technoblade called, releasing Wilbur in favor of pulling Fundy out of his belongings. “Will, teach your kid manners.”

“Fundy is *clever* and *resourceful*, and who am I to squander any natural talents?”

Technoblade sighed. Loudly. Fundy wriggled in his hold, his hands large enough to easily encircle the small child.

Philza was giggling. “Watch him teach Fundy to be polite for everyone except Techno, specifically,” he said, leaning conspiratorially towards Ranboo. Normally he’d be glad to be included and offer a smile and hesitant wag of his tail, but his nerves were pulled a little taut at the moment, so he just nodded stiffly.

He would give *anything* for an out right about now. An excuse to leave leave leave leave leave immediately and not be involved in conversation and socialization and a stranger who was so well-beloved by people Ranboo knew that Ranboo didn’t know at all.

He watched Wilbur hoist Fundy up onto Technoblade's shoulders, little booted feet not even reaching the end of Technoblade's furred neckline. He watched Wilbur grab Fundy's little hands and laugh at how much *taller* Fundy was up there, Technoblade bearing it stoically as Philza laughed, good natured and twinkling. He watched Philza's face, the way he seemed... it wasn't that Philza was closed off or unfriendly, normally. The exact opposite, actually. It was just that, well, something about having his son (and newfound grandchild) in the cabin made Philza seem *bright*. Aglow with a simple and soul-deep joy.

Wilbur flung himself carelessly onto the couch next to his father and Ranboo crammed himself into the corner to make room. Philza immediately hooked an arm over Wilbur's shoulders and pulled him down, cupping the side of his curls and kissing his hair with a little shake of his head that made Wilbur laugh.

"Ohhhh, I've missed you," Philza said fondly, Max's tail thumping in the background as he was allowed a more thorough sniff at Fundy, once again held between Technoblade's large hands.

"Missed you too dad, sorry I haven't visited sooner."

"Or written me."

"My communicator was broken!"

"You have access to paper and ink!"

"Oh piss off, you don't even live in the last place I saw you. I trekked all the way out there just to find it ransacked and had to follow a *compass* like some sort of *barbarian* to find you."

"That's what the compass is fucking for!"

Twitch perched in Wilbur's hair as the two of them laughed, preening briefly at the curls before cawing, "Little shit!"

"Yeah, Will's home," Philza said, reaching up to pet them and getting a friendly beak on the finger for his efforts.

"Missed you too, Twitch."

"Little shit!"

"Yes yes yes *hello*. Did I not greet you properly when I came in and now you're demanding compensation?"

"Yes!"

Wilbur, Philza, and Technoblade laughed, Max panting and wagging and looking between them with the jovial incomprehension of dogs and Ranboo's lips twitched ever so slightly upward, despite how clenched every single muscle in his body was.

Fortunately, he was more or less allowed to sit quietly in the background of their conversation for a little while. Catch his breath, at least. Technoblade passed mugs of tea around, and that was the last anyone demanded Ranboo's attention for for some time. He learned that Twitch's name for Wilbur was actually literally "Little shit" and that they never called him anything else, *especially* not his name. He learned that Technoblade was more physically... "affectionate" with Wilbur than anyone

else he'd seen Technoblade interact with, meaning that he had Wilbur in a headlock or had his arm twisted behind his back or hip-checked him about as frequently as the man talked. He also learned that Wilbur. Uh. Very very *rarely* stopped talking.

Which was good for Ranboo, because yay, no real social obligation. Good for Philza, because he could seemingly listen to his son ramble for hours and days and weeks without ever getting bored. Good for Technoblade, who seemed to enjoy the plethora of excuses to playfully heckle their houseguest.

Fundy had made friends with Max, and was currently attempting to ride him like a horse. Ranboo was pretty sure Max had no intention of getting up off the floor, but it was a very cute sight nonetheless.

Eventually, Fundy gave up, trotted over to Wilbur, and tugged on the hem of his coat. He paused mid-gesticulation (and Ranboo hadn't been paying attention to whatever story he'd been telling) and bent to scoop Fundy up in his arms.

"Hey baby," he greeted affectionately, "Did you have fun with the dog?"

"Mm," Fundy confirmed. "When do we eat?"

Wilbur, Philza, and Technoblade laughed, even Ranboo snickering once. Wilbur kissed Fundy's furry cheek as Philza slapped his hands down on his thighs and stood from the couch, popping his back briefly with a little flap of his wings.

"I'll get started on dinner."

Ranboo began to rise as well. "I can—"

"Nah, nah nah," Philza cut him off, pressing him gently back down onto the couch. "My boy's home; I'm cooking."

"I wanna help!" Fundy demanded.

"Fundy baby, we're guests here."

Fundy whined. Wilbur sighed, then kissed one furry little ear indulgently.

"Alright, let's go *watch*, okay? We'll help if Grandpa Phil asks."

Ranboo watched Wilbur go lean on the crafting table, near the stove, and resume whatever story he'd been telling Philza, this time with a child on his hip. Philza relit the fireplace, and, ahhhh, Ranboo would just. Finish cleaning that later. It wasn't the end of the world that he hadn't done it on time, nobody was mad at him, he'd do it *later* because he had all the time in the world and he'd gotten it half emptied so there was space for new wood and Philza didn't even notice he was so wrapped up in Wilbur's story and Ranboo should've finished cleaning it instead of just sitting there, silent and useless on the couch for the last couple *hours* he would've had plenty of time to finish—

He jolted a little when Technoblade settled a warm hand on his shoulder.

"You holding up?" Technoblade asked, low and quiet and unheard by the others, even though the main floor wasn't exactly spacious.

Ranboo swallowed, louder than he'd expected his own throat to be, and nodded, eyes low and staring into the middle distance. Technoblade squeezed the back of his neck, then rubbed up and down Ranboo's back. It was pathetically reassuring, and he had to repress the whine that threatened to rise.

"Will can be a *lot*, even after you live with him for the better part of two decades. We'd understand if this got to being too much for you."

But Ranboo didn't *want* it to be too much for him. It was one stranger and a child—a pretty well behaved child, at that! He wanted to be able to interact with new people, new people his—Technoblade and Philza—*liked*! He knew other free people didn't have these problems. They were able to stroll about their villages and chat with one another and be in *crowds* without getting jittery and shaky and fish-eyed and panicked. Surely, surely Ranboo should be able to handle *one* extra person and one child in his living space making noise and chatter and *changing his routine* and throwing everything out of alignment and catching him *entirely* off guard, but Technoblade and Philza hadn't been expecting this either and *they* were fine.

So Ranboo should be fine. He shouldn't be wire-tense and nervous and spiralling and overwhelmed.

So Ranboo *would* be fine.

He would.

"I'm okay," he said, barely above a whisper and probably not all that convincing, but he was determined to act like a free person and not bring down Philza's good mood or be any more of a burden to Technoblade than he already was.

"I'm okay," he repeated more firmly, looking up at Technoblade with a thin smile. Technoblade thumped his hand down on Ranboo's back with a little nod.

"Alright," he said, not exactly sounding like he believed Ranboo, but thankfully didn't press the subject. Not that Technoblade was inclined to press a lot of subjects. He was very willing to roll with whatever punches he encountered, and Ranboo couldn't begin to express how grateful he was for that.

Technoblade examined the little family trio near the stove, then set a crafting table down in the center of the floor and handed Ranboo some wool. "Start dying that?"

Ranboo nodded. He went down the ladder to the chest where they kept the dyes, grabbed the leftover colored cloth they'd already made, too. Back up the ladder, Wilbur was saying, "There's no reason for you to have two crafting tables on one floor!"

"You're sitting on this one," Technoblade said, and Ranboo noticed how he had little Fundy's arm outstretched and the measuring tape held carefully over. Oh! So that's what they'd be doing. Ranboo got out his memory book—no, wait, his *instruction* book because that was where sewing instructions were, and gave himself a brief refresher.

"I can move. Also why are you making clothes for Fundy? She's already got plenty."

"You brought her here in that," Technoblade said with a disdainful finger pointed at the bundle of blankets near the couch.

“Swaddling is a *completely* valid method of confining and moving a child. I mean just *look* at this little shit.” Wilbur held Fundy up, little legs dangling for Techno to measure as Fundy grinned with far too much self-satisfaction for a three-or-four-year-old (Ranboo wasn’t super great at guessing ages). “She’s wiggly.”

Fundy nodded with a pleased little yip.

Twitch fluttered over and perched on Wilbur’s head, cawing out “Little shit!” and pecking him lightly.

“Your kid needs actual winter clothes, Will.”

“Swaddling keeps plenty of warmth in.” Wilbur pulled Fundy back to his chest and attempted to wave Twitch off. They remained where they were.

“She can’t move around or play in the snow cocooned in blankets,” Technoblade asserted, giving Fundy a very brief skritch behind the ear before he moved back to Ranboo and the second crafting table, setting the little paper with measurements between them.

“Your Uncle Techno is a softie,” Wilbur said, nuzzling into the fur on Fundy’s cheek.

“Who exactly are you calling ‘uncle’ anything?” Technoblade snapped at him, his tone making Ranboo reflexively bristle, but the words weren’t aimed at him and Wilbur just laughed it off. He gripped his tail just below the tuft and slipped it through, flattening the flared fur.

“Hey Chat, have you figured out how to make /rainbowchat work yet? I promise you’ll figure it out if you just keep—ahaha, *trying!*” Wilbur shouted, dancing away from Techno who was now stalking him with a twisted strip of fabric, looking very much like he was—oh, yeah, yup, there he went, half-strangling Wilbur who laughed.

“I oughta murder you,” Technoblade grouched, “Noooo, chat, don’t listen to him, noooooo. Does the fake murdering of your pet madman not deter you at *all!*?”

“Awww, Chat favors me?” Wilbur crooned, back pressed to Technoblade’s chest and head tilted up so his curls twined with the fur of Technoblade’s cape as he grinned up at him.

“Chat’s opinion on you is profoundly mixed.”

“I’ll take it.”

Technoblade snorted and released him, returning to the crafting table. It occurred to Ranboo that he should’ve spent the time the two of them were roughhousing to start in on the clothes.

Except he was free, and not a slave, so he didn’t *have* to.

A beat after that, he remembered that Technoblade was also disinclined to care.

He was fine.

It occurred to Ranboo just how... happy, Wilbur’s presence made the whole cabin. Philza couldn’t stop smiling, he moved through their small kitchen like it was time for celebration. Technoblade’s ears were perked upright and his shoulders relaxed, and he was playful for all that his words were grumpy and grouching. Wilbur himself was practically shining, and Fundy was tooth-rottingly cute.

So really, it was just Ranboo. It was *just* Ranboo who was having problems. Except he *wouldn't* ruin the good mood and he *wouldn't* be clingy and needy and obnoxious so he *wouldn't* have problems. If he was going to have problems he would just simply tell them no.

Easy, right?

“So Will, how long were you planning on staying?” Philza asked, garlic and ginger simmering in oil on the stove as he chopped an onion.

“Aaaah, maybe a few days?” Ranboo tensed, but kept his attention on the cloth in front of him, even as his ears angled towards the little kitchen area despite his best wishes. “Probably not as long as you want me to but.” Wilbur shrugged.

“You’re busy,” Philza said agreeably. “And now that you’ve got a functional communicator maybe you’ll write me a little more often.”

Just. Just focus on helping Technoblade make little kid clothes.

Wilbur laughed. “I promise, I promise!”

He wasn’t even cutting or sewing, Technoblade had asked for help with the dyes, it was easy, he knew how to do this.

“But that’s good news; oh, we’ve got some spare beds in storage from when we first moved in. We’ll set one of those up for you and Fundy to sleep in tonight.”

Ranboo’s hands weren’t moving. Well, they were shaking, which, uh, he guessed counted as moving. But they weren’t *moving*-moving.

“Oh pog. Actually, I haven’t seen the rest of your house yet, you’re all sleeping upstairs?” Wilbur said, setting Fundy down (she was squirming anyway) and moving towards the ladder.

Cold fear iced through him. “E-Enderchest, um,” he tried, voice dying in his throat.

“End—” Wilbur looked to Ranboo, then the actual literal enderchest along the back wall in confusion.

“Enderchest is the name of the cat,” Philza informed. “She’s not much for strangers; maybe it’s best you stayed off the top floor.”

Wilbur snorted. “Who the hell names a cat Enderchest?”

Ranboo’s shoulders hunched and his ears pinned all the way back, cheeks hot.

“Ranboo actually named all of them,” Philza remarked idly, wing snapping out to bonk Wilbur on the shoulder.

“Ah, I mean, it’s nice!” Wilbur said, awkward and chagrined, looking at Ranboo. “Unique.”

Ranboo looked directly at the floorboards and attempted to mutter out a thanks. He. He took a deep, slow breath, and flinched only slightly when Wilbur climbed the ladder down to the ground floor, remarking that it looked nice down there.

“Stay away from the chest with sand,” Technoblade called idly.

“Oooo! A chest with sand? Don’t mind if I do!”

Philza, at the stove, began laughing silently, setting down his knife to cover his mouth with the back of his wrist. Fundy looked up from where she was once again climbing all over Max, two fox paws full of belly fluff, and looked between Philza and the ladder.

Ranboo couldn’t recall a *single* chest with sand in it, downstairs, but that wasn’t so unusual. He couldn’t remember a lot of things. He was pretty sure his memory had been getting better, with regards to like, life events and whatnot, important stuff. But inventory? Yeah, no, no hopes of remembering that. So if Technoblade said there was a chest with sand in it, Ranboo, of course, believed him.

More importantly, he should really try to help Technoblade with the clothing he was making. Ranboo had the necessary skill. Or at the very least, he had knowledge and could *help*. He should help. He just needed to *move* his *hands* which was admittedly a little easier with Wilbur downstairs, the sound of chest after chest opening, hovering, then closing, opening, waiting, closing, opening, pausing, closing now spontaneously grating on Ranboo’s nerves. The sound had never bothered him before. But now he was tensed, listening for it, *waiting* for the sound to annoy him, and he tried to focus, tried to distract himself. It’d fade into background nothingness if he could just *get his brain on track to do the thing that was directly in front of his hands*.

The amount of progress he made was pitiful. Laughable, even, if he could’ve found it funny. He was so pathetic, he would honestly be more of a hindrance than help, at this rate.

Why was he so *heavy*?

Wilbur climbed the ladder loudly, then stormed up directly to Technoblade, Ranboo skittering back and pressing himself, small and unobtrusive, against the wall. Wilbur grabbed Technoblade by the front of his chiton and pulled, though it did nothing to move the smirking man.

“You fucking liar!”

Wilbur wasn’t *shouting*, exactly. But he uh. Didn’t sound happy either. And not happy was a pretty good synonym for outright furious, in Ranboo’s experience, with the exception of Philza and Technoblade and Philza and Technoblade *only*.

“Trouble finding it, Will?”

Philza was not-entirely-successfully hiding his laughter again, which was just about the only thing that prevented this from sending Ranboo into an all-out attack.

“I searched through every goddamn chest down there *twice* before I realized you were just fucking with me.”

“Me? Never. You should check a third time, you are pretty blind,” Technoblade said, poking Wilbur’s glasses askew. Wilbur straightened them with a huff.

“You’re an arse. Here I was trying to heckle my dad—”

“And ruin your appetite *and* digestive system,” Philza interjected around his giggling.

“—and instead you use it as an opportunity to heckle me. For shame, Technoblade, for shame.”

“I feel no shame, actually; I’m uhhh, pretty pleased with what I’ve accomplished here today.”

They were playing. They were playing they were playing they were playing. Like when Philza would swear lightly at Technoblade or he would hipcheck Philza after a bad pun, except louder and more intense and with a person Ranboo didn’t know and wasn’t used to and he was fine he was fine he was taking deep breaths and not panicking and not being a wreck and not bringing the mood down because *everyone else* was having a good time and—

Ranboo silently slipped down the ladder.

Chapter End Notes

Ranboo: Gee I’m doing pretty well lately; I feel like I’m genuinely happy and at peace

An unexpected deviation to his routine: *occurs*

Ranboo: actually everything is awful

And so, once again, what was originally intended to be one chapter has been split into three.

Will and Fundy are doing too much and Ranboo is having too many emotions for me to make this one or even two chapters, soooooooooo, world's most awkward cliffhanger for y'all.

I am worried about what the upped chapter count is going to do to the pacing I'd been trying to establish in recent chapters, but uhhhhh it's my fanfiction so y'all get unpolished mess if I say so XD

As ever, thank you all so much for your feedback and interest, it means the world to me <3

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place directly on the heels of the following chapter. It had just gotten too long to stay as one single piece.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo was fine. Ranboo was fine! He was fine, he was so fine, he was a-o-fucking-kay, he was, he *was*, he, he would be.

He climbed down the ladder, silent and quick, just, just needing to get away from the sounds and the voices and the light and the *people* and—

He could use the excuse that he'd thought he'd forgotten one of the dyes down here and had gone to look for it, and had “forgotten” that it was already up on the crafting table. He just.

He just needed a minute.

He could still hear their voices through the floorboards and open hatch. Of course he could. It made sense. Why did they sound so *loud* though? He moved towards the wall of chests, away from the hole in the ceiling that connected the two floors. Maybe a little quieter, over here. That was nice. That was good.

He just needed a minute.

He curled up on the floor, hands over his pinned-back ears and forehead pressed to his knees, eyes closed in half-soothing darkness. The fireplace down here had been going since he cleaned it, so the stones beneath him weren't *too* cold to sit on. It wasn't like the punishment room, cold and dark and frightening. There was light, and warmth, and Ranboo had put himself there and could leave anytime he wanted.

He just needed a minute. Then he could go back up the ladder and be calm and not panicked and not scared. Then he could go back up and listen to a strange man with his loud voice that Philza and Technoblade knew and so clearly and obviously loved, and Ranboo would love him too, because Wilbur was one of them, their family, and Ranboo loved them so much, he'd love every piece of their lives, he would. At the very least, he would like Wilbur, and get along with him. After a minute, he'd be *fine*, and he'd act like a free person whose head wasn't full of holes and who didn't get stressed out at *one* extra person in the house he lived in.

He'd be better, in just a minute.

He'd do better.

He'd *make* himself better.

He'd make himself anything he had to be, if he just had a minute to string himself back together.

But before he could, anxiety rose, unbidden, and drew its slimy fingers down the inside of his throat.

He was taking too long. They'd notice. Technoblade would come down here and he and Philza would *worry* and Ranboo would take everyone's good evening and make it about *him* and *his problems* and they'd be patient with him but they'd also be *annoyed* because Ranboo couldn't fucking keep it together why couldn't he keep it together what if they thought he should be more—more—"free" than this, by now? He, he'd been doing so well lately, was this proof that he wasn't "recovering?" That he hadn't "adjusted" *enough*? God, they had one whole entire functional regular person upstairs being happy and "well-adjusted" and not a constant and consistent fucking *problem* and and and *and* there was also a grandchild in the equation who was better behaved and more pleasant than Ranboo could ever be what was even the *point* in keeping him around—

Ranboo startled, feet sliding hard against the stone floor as he tried to cram himself further back into the corner, when Technoblade's cape fell around his shoulders.

See?

He'd taken too long, and now it was everyone else's problem. *Idiot*.

"I—I'm fine."

Ranboo could not see Technoblade arch his eyebrow underneath the mask, but he got the impression that that's what he'd done.

"I'm fine," he insisted again, jerking up onto less-than-stable legs and pulling Technoblade's cloak from his shoulders, pushing it back up against Technoblade's chest for all it made something just beneath his sternum *ache*. "I, I don't need this, I'm fine, I, I was just—" He glanced at the chests, but nobody was going to believe that he'd been looking for dye when he hadn't opened a single one of them and also Technoblade had found him curled up in the corner with his hands over his ears. "I just—"

"Ranboo," Technoblade said gently, familiar fingers in Ranboo's hair. He whimpered.

"I'm fine," he repeated, small and high, pressing the cape briefly harder against his chest, begging Technoblade to please believe him.

"Hey, hey, deep breath for me."

Ranboo nodded, breathing in. See? Fine! Totally okay, nothing to see here.

"Ranboo, it's *okay*. I don't know if you remember me telling you this, but Will's a *lot*, even for people who like him. It's not going to bother anybody if you need to step out for a bit. He knows what he's like, he's not gonna be offended or anything."

That, that wasn't, that couldn't, but, Ranboo appreciated the reassurance. He shouldn't need it. He shouldn't. But he was receiving it, and maybe Technoblade's words would let him *calm down* enough that he could act like a free person again and things would just be okay.

"And like, I get it," Technoblade continued, slow fingers scratching lightly through Ranboo's hair. "I don't like having socializing suddenly sprung on me either. The only reason Will's getting a pass

is ‘cause he’s Phil’s kid, otherwise I’d demand he get out of my house. Surprise people are not fun, I am with you on that.”

That—did, make Ranboo feel slightly better. If it happened to Technoblade too, then, maybe it wasn’t... *all* bad that Ranboo felt like he just couldn’t handle this?

“Dinner’s ready. Do you think you’d be up to come eat, and then after you could go upstairs and chill with Enderchest on the bed?”

God, Enderchest. Ranboo wanted to go be with her *so bad* actually, yes, why had he even bothered coming down here for an excuse that hadn’t even worked when he could’ve been upstairs holding his cat this whole time? But food did sound nice, and it smelled amazing, and Ranboo could. Could. The end was in sight, he just needed to get through dinner, and then Technoblade was letting him off the hook for the evening. He was pretty sure. Maybe he’d have to say goodnight to them later or something but he could do that. He could do all of this. He could.

He nodded.

“Would you like a hug first?” Technoblade asked, mask tilting down as he examined where Ranboo still pressed two fistful’s of the man’s cape against his chest. Ranboo—

Was trying not to be a clingy, needy ex-slave dependent on his—Technoblade—for everything.

Ranboo really, really wanted that hug though.

He compromised. He unlocked his arms, stepping forward to press himself in against Technoblade like he’d done so many times before. But he didn’t let himself linger there. He could accept hugs when he was being *good*, when he was acting like he was supposed to, he couldn’t reward himself for shit-idiot behavior. He pulled away after a few seconds, leaving Technoblade’s cape in pink-tinted hands.

“You can wear it if you want to,” Technoblade offered, and Ranboo did want to, but he wasn’t going to because he didn’t deserve it and he wasn’t going to be a needy clingy mess.

“I don’t need it,” he reasserted, ears twitching at how harsh that had accidentally come out.

Technoblade paused a moment, then threw it back on and refastened the clasp. He clapped Ranboo on the shoulder before climbing up the ladder.

Okay. Dinner. He could handle this.

He received knowing smiles from both Philza and Wilbur that only made him cringe slightly, and he helped Technoblade set the table, following him close like a second shadow. Philza handed them bowls to take to the table, and Wilbur pulled Fundy up onto his lap with a half-portion in a second bowl right next to his own.

When Philza came to take his seat, he paused by Wilbur’s chair and hugged him one-armed around the neck to press kisses to his hair again, happy and free with his affection. Wilbur’s eyes squinted closed as he smiled, raising a hand to grip gently at Philza’s forearm and leaning his face up.

Ranboo scooted his seat slightly closer to Technoblade.

Ranboo's skin itched, his knee bouncing beneath the table and his tail fluffed up and twitching behind him. He tried not to eat obviously quickly, tried to slow himself down so it didn't look like he was rushing to get out *get out*. But. Heeeee might not have been quite as successful on that one. It wasn't like he was focusing on a whole lot other than his food anyway, head down and ears twitching at every uptick in volume from their conversation.

He was done first, because of course he was done first, and then sat there awkwardly with his empty bowl and hunched shoulders and should he just leave? Was he allowed to just leave? Should he ask Technoblade? He didn't want to interrupt. He fiddled idly with the bowl, brushing the pads of his fingers against the texture. He should trim his claws again soon. He picked lightly at one, noticing a small notch that his thumbnail would catch lightly on. If he dug into that and pulled, the claw would probably chip off, but then it would be all ragged and he couldn't remember where the nail file was and certainly wasn't going to ask so maybe he shouldn't mess with the nail except now he'd been fiddling with it so the previously-innocuous notch was a full-blown chip in the side and it'd catch on every piece of cloth he touched now if he didn't trim it and—

Technoblade's warm hand on his, Technoblade leaning in.

"You can head upstairs if you're done."

"Thank you sir," Ranboo said with no small measure of relief, taking his bowl to the sink and leaving it there before climbing directly up the ladder, feeling like the whole cabin was staring directly at his back as he did. He didn't look, didn't check.

God, he was such a weird little freak wasn't he?

"Hey," he said quietly, slipping white fingers under Enderpearl's belly and black underneath Jjjjjjeffery's, placing the two of them on the bed before flopping heavily behind them, blocking their most immediate path off the edge of the bed. Enderchest, predictably, followed, hopping up onto the mattress and yelling at him. Probably about all the new sounds and smells coming from downstairs.

"I know, I know, you didn't sign up for visitors. You don't like strangers very much, I know," he murmured, pulling Enderchest in towards him and curling in around her, tail flopping over his hip. Enderpearl and Jjjjjjeffery, being kittens, took an immediate shine to his tail and it's tufted end. Meaning that they both simultaneously attacked it, Enderpearl rolling onto her back and kicking at it before his tail tip twitched and bapped her on her little nose, startling her and making her flip inelegantly around.

He chuckled.

He took a deep, slow breath, fingers passing along Enderchest's fur. She continued to complain, conducting her walkabouts. Jjjjjjeffery attempted to pounce on her tail next, and she scruffed him, set him back down next to Ranboo's tail, and flopped herself into a little donut right on Ranboo's face. He spluttered (bad idea, cat hair on tongue now) and twisted his head, getting his nose back into breathable range, and chuckled quietly at her.

"Hey, Miss Enderchest, is it my turn to entertain the kids?"

Enderchest's tail tip flicked, and he put off petting her for now. He didn't want her to feel the need to stand up and start walking around again when she was currently cuddling him so nicely, so he just set his hand on the mattress right up against her little beans and closed his eyes.

This was nice.

God, why was Wilbur's voice so *loud*? He could hear him talking through the floor, none of his words but just. His voice. Occasionally Philza's and even rarer, Technoblade's. Fundy rarely spoke, but when she did it was higher pitched and louder, though Ranboo found he didn't mind as much. *Normally* hearing voices wafting through the floorboards was reassuring, soothing, the sounds of Philza and Technoblade's conversation a familiar comfort. Now, though, everything was just too loud. The sun coming in low through the western window was too bright. The world was too much to handle right then. The fact that he couldn't handle it *sucked*.

He'd thought he had been doing better.

But now here he was, hiding in the bedroom and feeling guilty for it, even though he'd gotten permission. He just. Part of him *wanted* to go downstairs and sit with the others and listen to the conversation and have a nice time like *everyone else was having* and the other part of him just wanted to curl up on the bed so tightly that he vanished entirely and all of him felt so guilty and conflicted and *bad*.

This sucked this sucked this sucked this sucked he hated this why couldn't his brain work why couldn't he be normal why *couldn't* he handle this?? It wasn't fair. He didn't want to be like this. He didn't want Wilbur to be here. No, that wasn't fair, that wasn't fair of him, of course he wanted Wilbur here, Wilbur was Philza's son. And Fundy was Philza's grandchild. Of course he wanted them here.

He just. Didn't like the fact that nowhere in the house was silent, right then. And it was so *stupid*, too, because hadn't his master's estate been in a constant state of sound and motion and other slaves and servants? Wasn't Ranboo *supposed* to be used to this? Why should he be bothered by noise and chatter? Had he really been so much tougher *there*? In that place?

"Enderchest," Ranboo whined, cracking an eye open to watch Enderpearl jump with splayed paws onto her brother, the two of them tumbling over to the side on the blanket. "Why is everything so hard to deal with all of a sudden?"

Enderchest rolled onto her back, paws bent in front of her exposed belly and once again she pressed her fur directly into Ranboo's nose. He snorted.

Wilbur's voice grated at the divot in Ranboo's skull, right where his neck met his head, tight and scratchy, but Ranboo tried to ignore it. Focus on something else. Soooomething else. It'd drown into white noise if Ranboo could just find something else to give his attention to.

Jjjjjjeffery let out a high, *loud* mew and hissed, chomping on his sister, and Ranboo bapped the two of them with the superior size and strength of his tail tip. They tumbled one whole inch. Absolute devastation, they never stood a chance. Oh, but they retaliated! Putting aside their differences to face a common foe, Enderpearl flanked the white half, and Jjjjjjeffery took the black, what a coordinated attack from the kittens!

But what's this? Now the tail was slipping out from their grasps! Oh, and they'd had it too, they'd had those alluring little clawfuls of fluff in their paws, but woe! How high up it was, their tiny kitten bodies would never reach—unless. Yes! It was! It was coming back down! Oh fortuitous day! But would they be quick enough to catch it before it caught them in their faces?

No, not at all. They were once again sent careening the whole inch that it took for their tiny oval bodies to hit the bed, *ferocious* hissing and meowing occurring as they once again formed their counterstrike. Jjjjjj Jeffery seemed to be attempting to close off the tail's exits, pinning it from above, while Enderpearl wasted no time and got right down to business clawing at it with all four paws, belly exposed but powerful and mighty hindlegs kick-kick-kick-kicking as fast as she could go!

Ranboo giggled, continuing to narrate the *epic battle* between his tail and the kittens, laughing aloud and making Enderchest's ear twitch from his breath when Enderpearl launched up onto her hindlegs and spread her front paws wide.

They did not have particularly great aim just yet, but given that their primary food source was still attached to Enderchest, they didn't exactly *need* to be apex predators.

Ranboo should stop being an idiot fucking *baby* and go downstairs already.

Exceeeeeept, that sounded like hell and he absolutely did not want to do that.

And why did he have to feel so guilty, anyway? He was having a nice time playing with the kittens. He was *allowed* to be upstairs and not with them. Nobody would be mad at him for this, Technoblade had told him.

Oh! His memory book! He needed to update that!!!

Oh gee, how much had he forgotten already?! Wait, wait he'd. When had he written in this? Okay, he must have written while he and Philza were sitting on the couch, because that was as far as the memories went. O...kay. He did not remember writing in this at all, but.

That wasn't exactly unusual. So. Anyway.

He penned in the rest of the day, flipping back and skimming for any instances of Wilbur's name. Not much, nothing more than he already knew, that he was Philza's son. Oh, that Philza had read him political dramas as a child, that he was apparently very smart.

Ranboo smiled. The note about Philza reading to Wilbur reminded Ranboo of when Technoblade had read to him, back when he was sick and miserable. He closed his eyes, tail fwipping up out from the tiny and pointy grasps of the kittens, and recalled the warm-safe-home feeling of being cuddled up to Technoblade's side and listening to stories.

Man, kittens did not tire out easily. How long had they been playing? It had to be a while, right? The lighting in the room was different, and that was hard evidence that time had passed, so it wasn't just Ranboo's loosey-goosey grip on time playing tricks on him. Right? Right. And still, Ranboo's tail was of utmost interest to the two of them, though occasionally they would be distracted from it by the siren call of pouncing on each other.

"Aren't you sleepy?" Ranboo asked, Enderchest mrrping inquisitively at him suddenly speaking again. She looked around, then settled her chin back onto her paws, returning to her catnap. Ranboo chuckled, and slid his hands under and around her so he could pull her in and press little kisses to her cheek. She complained.

"I know, I know, you're just so pretty and perfect and wonderful," Ranboo said, humming to himself. She tolerated exactly three more kisses before she started to wiggle, and Ranboo let her

go. She scolded him, padded her way down to his legs, and flopped against his thighs, once again making a little black donut.

“The spot you were laying on is all warm now,” Ranboo remarked, pressing his hand to the cloth.

Jjjjjj Jeffery pounced on his mother, who looked at Ranboo as though to say *Are you going to do anything about this?!*

Ranboo giggled. “Hey, I’ve *been* kitten-sitting, I don’t know what more you want from me, lady.”

The ladder creaked, heavy enough to be Technoblade, and Ranboo propped himself up, ears perked. Anxiety curled in his stomach—what would he say? Ranboo felt so *bad* for hiding up here the whole evening but...

“Hey, we’re getting ready to turn in. Do you want me to take care of Ranmoo and Bob while I’m outside?” Technoblade asked when his head poked through the floor, not even bothering to climb all the way.

“I—to, sleep?” Ranboo asked, looking to the western window. The sun had set, but the horizon was still bathed in dark oranges and reds. The sun had *just* set. Wasn’t this a little earlier than normal? Ranboo didn’t have a good memory but routines could stick better than single-instance stuff and he was *pretty sure* this was not, in fact, their routine.

“Yeah. Fundy’s got a bedtime, and I am completely drained. I’m gonna take care of Carl and hit the sack.”

“I, I’ll take care of Ranmoo and Bob,” Ranboo said with a little nod, getting up. Oop, too quick, vertigo. He blinked the spots away and shook his head slightly, then followed Technoblade down the ladder.

The main floor was transformed. The table had been pressed to the corner, its chairs all gathered around two sides instead of four, and directly in front of the fireplace a bed—the very first bed Technoblade and Ranboo had crafted, their first night here—now sat. Fundy was dressed in jammies, whining up at Wilbur, who was mid-convincing that yes, bedtime still existed, *even* at Grandpa’s house. Philza was seated on the couch, a mug of tea in his hand. There were actually quite a few cups and mugs out, and Ranboo felt a twinge of—hhh, it just. Looked like it would’ve been nice. He was sorry he’d missed it. Realistically he knew he would’ve been miserable and the tea would’ve sat uneasily in his anxious stomach, but theoretically it looked like they’d been having a good time.

He slipped on his coat and went out to feed Bob and Ranmoo and herd them into their little shack for the night.

Generally, he was very pleased with how well the two had taken to each other. Bob liked to follow her around, brushing up against her broadside and seeming—to anthropomorphize the cows a little—absolutely smitten.

“Are you cozying up to your little girlfriend?” Ranboo teased as Bob nosed some of the hay out of his bundle in the direction of Ranmoo’s portion. It could’ve been entirely coincidental, big cow muzzles were not the finest of tools, but still. The idea that he would try to share with her was cute, and hurt nobody to believe even if it wasn’t true, so Ranboo chose to say that that’s what he was doing.

He secured the latch and trotted over to the stable to see if Technoblade was done. Normally he'd just... go back inside, but normally there wasn't anyone else *in the house*.

This was a tactical error on his part, because the doors to the ground floor opened and Wilbur and Philza stepped out, wearing coats and armor both, swords sheathed at their sides. Ranboo did *not* feel scared at that he didn't he didn't he didn't he felt fine and perfectly dandy there was *no problem* with Wilbur having a weapon it was night that was a reasonable thing to have. Since he was. Going out. With Philza. Uh.

"Where are you two headed?" Technoblade asked, and Ranboo had never been more relieved to be startled by a voice behind him in his life. Ohhh thank goodness someone else to do the talking thing.

"Out for a stroll. Fundy'll never fall asleep if we try to chat in the same room."

"We'll be back in a bit," Philza said, reaching up to ruffle Ranboo's hair (and Ranboo needed to bend down a little to let him). "Don't wait up."

"Don't wait up!" Twitch echoed from Philza's shoulder.

"Bring a lantern with you," Technoblade reminded idly, unworried about the night mobs. And why would he be? It was Philza. Philza was a very deadly and competent man. As was Technoblade, so, since they—er, since *Philza* raised Wilbur (and Technoblade had been... there), that meant he was good at fighting too, right? Ranboo was pretty sure that was how that worked.

Inside, Ranboo climbed up the ladder, past Fundy who was curled up in bed on the darkened main floor, the only lights to see by the dim dregs of false-sunset taking their last breath through the window and the fire crackling happily in its hearth, up to the bedroom where Ranboo quietly dressed for bed, not wanting to make too much noise and keep Fundy awake.

Technoblade was an efficient person. He didn't tend to loiter or hesitate, particularly with routines, but if Ranboo didn't know any better he'd say the man *rushed* through his own nightly routine, sinking heavily into the bed while Ranboo finished updating his memory book one last time.

Ranboo slipped onto the mattress next to him and vwooped softly when Technoblade reached out for him, an offering. Ranboo half expected him to pull him in, like he'd taken to doing, but tonight Technoblade waited, so Ranboo slipped under the offered arm himself. He nuzzled underneath Technoblade's chin and curled his limbs and tail (did his tail count as a limb? Actually, yeah, it probably did) around him.

"Are you, okay?" Ranboo asked hesitantly, quiet.

"Mm," Technoblade grunted, fingers idly tangling in the hair at Ranboo's nape. "I love Will. We all love Will. Will's great." Technoblade sucked in a deep breath. "He is also *incredibly* exhausting."

Ranboo let out a little hrm in agreement, dragging his claws lightly up and down Technoblade's back.

"Hence the early bedtime?" Ranboo clarified.

"Hence the early bedtime." Technoblade yawned, jaw clicking loud enough for Ranboo to hear it—though he *was* right there so that probably made sense that it was audible. "That, and Fundy was

getting fussy.”

Ranboo yawned as well. “Do they—children—do that a lot?”

“When they’re tired, or hungry, or overwhelmed, yeah,” Technoblade confirmed. “The problem with kids is that they’re new; *everything* is the best or worst thing that’s ever happened to ‘em cause they have no frame of reference.”

Hm. Well, thanks to having a brain made out of holes, Ranboo *also* had no frame of reference for... most things. Maybe that was why his emotions were so out of control tonight.

Who was he kidding, tonight was just a case of his brain being bad.

Ranboo ran his hand idly across Technoblade’s back as he fell silent. Contemplative. It was... weird, for lack of a better word, seeing Technoblade actually daunted by something. The guy could travel the Nether and build a house with no sleep, but a surprise visit from a loved one left him like this.

Ranboo filled his cheeks with air, ducking his head ever so slightly downwards. Technoblade was... very cool. Ranboo admired him a lot. So. Seeing him get taken down a peg by the same thing that had left Ranboo such a mess—and Technoblade even *knew* the guy, it wasn’t like Wilbur was a stranger to him—it. Maybe felt a little nice. Like, like kinship. Like they were in the same boat.

Part of Ranboo wanted to stay awake until Philza got home, despite being told to not wait up, and the other part was pressed up against the warm and familiar bulk of Technoblade who was twirling idle circles through Ranboo’s hair. It was getting kind of long. Nearly as long as Philza’s was, really. He smiled to himself.

He did not stay awake until Philza got home. He did wake up, when the man slipped into bed behind him, and half-turned before Philza shushed and told them to go back to sleep, Technoblade grumbling something utterly unintelligible as he gripped blindly for his friend and Philza’s wing spread out overtop them. His skin was chilly, a sharp contrast to the warmth at Ranboo’s front, and Ranboo shivered briefly before burrowing back down into the trapped heat of the blanket and bedding. Enderchest scolded sleepily from the box under the bed, and Ranboo snorted before drifting back off.

He woke up with a hazy, cloudy sense of malaise hanging over him, and couldn’t piece together why until he opened his memory book and remembered oh yeah! Wilbur.

To be fair, Ranboo felt a little better equipped to handle him, that day. Particularly since he knew what to expect, now, more or less. He could make a guess. He was rested, he was prepared (sort of), he wasn’t going to bring down anyone’s mood, he *had* this. Okay! He put on his favorite outfit, the one that had previously been Technoblade’s and had been tailored by the two of them seated on the floor, and brushed both his hair and tail before joining the others downstairs.

Philza was cooking breakfast, Fundy had stolen Wilbur’s pillow off his side of the bed and was now squishing it as tightly as possible over her head, Technoblade was digging through a chest, and Wilbur was mid getting dressed.

Ranboo looked away, suddenly shy. It wasn’t anything he didn’t see, like, literally every day (Philza and Technoblade were far from bodyshy, though thankfully did not judge Ranboo for his

own sheepishness), but Wilbur looked. Nice.

“You know what I think?” Wilbur broke the silence, *loud* despite the morning and pulling a cheery yellow sweater over his head.

“You possess a multitude of thoughts,” Technoblade said, not looking up from the chest, while Philza made a questioning hum. Twitch whistled, then cawed, “Little shit!”

“Yes thank you Twitch. *I* think we should accentuate our breakfast with some nice fat strips of bacon.”

The chest Technoblade was in closed with a resounding thud, Wilbur bursting into a lilting peal of giggles as Technoblade turned and leveled an inscrutable gaze his way.

“Is that so,” Technoblade said, his voice *dangerous* and making the hairs on the back of Ranboo’s neck stand on end.

Wilbur grinned somehow wider and said, “Yeah! Add that flavor, you know?” even as he shifted slowly away as Technoblade approached him, even-paced, and every instinctual alarm in Ranboo’s hindbrain screamed *predator*.

“Well you know what *I* think?”

“What do you think, Techno?” Wilbur asked, the distance between them closing with the limited space of the main floor and the bed *and* table *and* couch *and* the other, smaller furniture shrinking the space that much further.

“I think,” Technoblade lunged, getting a startled yelp out of Wilbur and Ranboo both as he hoisted Wilbur over his shoulder, the man immediately struggling and laughing brightly, “some nice *human* meat can accentuate more than well enough.”

“Techno, Technahahaha, put me down!” Wilbur wiggled impressively, actually shifting in Technoblade’s grip which Ranboo was pretty sure most people would not be able to accomplish. From the stove, Philza snorted, and Max seemed *very* curious in what was happening.

For a brief second, it looked like Technoblade was setting him down, but he only adjusted his grip and flipped Wilbur around so he was now hoisted over his shoulder, but so that his head was facing forward.

“Techno, hey, no, put me down and *leave* me down!” Wilbur laughed.

“Nahhh, nah, see, I gotta add some human to the oatmeal,” Technoblade said, approaching the pot hanging in the fireplace. He sidestepped Philza, who was laughing in that bright, familiar way of his, and firelight danced off the two of them as Technoblade drew close.

“Noooo, no I don’t think you do!” Wilbur said, high pitched at the start and dissolving into giggles at the end.

“Yup, in it goes,” Technoblade quipped as he began to lower Wilbur slightly forward, arm tight around the man’s waist but Wilbur’s face lowering close to the heat.

“Techno Techno *Techno TECHNO* put me down put me down!” Wilbur shout-laughed as he gripped and scrambled at Technoblade’s front, wrinkling the fabric and wriggling impressively.

“That’s what I’m doing,” Technoblade said agreeably, lowering Wilbur a little further.

“Put me down NOT in the fireplace you gigantic arsehole!”

“Mmmmmm,” Technoblade hummed thoughtfully.

“My turn!” Fundy demanded, having crawled out of bed and now tugging at Technoblade’s tunic.

Technoblade straightened, pulling Wilbur out of the heat, and regarded Fundy a brief moment.

“Ow!” Wilbur exclaimed as his rear hit the floor, Ranboo’s tail poofing at the loud thud.

“My bad,” Technoblade said, sounding entirely unrepentant. He scooped Fundy up and moved away from the fireplace, arms lifted high with his hands secured around the little fox-hybrid. Fundy giggled to be held so high up, arms flung outward, and Philza clicked his tongue with an “awwwww.”

Ranboo agreed, it was pretty cute to see Technoblade hoisting Fundy up high, swinging low, and then back up high once again.

“Don’t drop my child like you dropped me,” Wilbur groused, getting to his feet and prompting Philza to laugh once again.

“I’m gonna drop your kid.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“Too late,” Technoblade said, tossing Fundy lightly onto the bed. Fundy bounced, squealing at an *impressive* pitch and giggling with a puffed up tail and an immediate, “Again!”

Technoblade held open his arms and Fundy jumped off the bed, only to be caught, hoisted, and thrown with another shriek of laughter. The two kept at it until Philza pronounced breakfast ready, and they spread out across the yet-to-be-moved-back table and couch, Ranboo curling up on a cushion next to Technoblade.

After they ate, Technoblade left to tend to Carl and set him free to roam, Philza had the chore of dishes wrangled out of his hands by Wilbur, and Ranboo made mention that he was going to take care of his own livestock.

He was brought to a halt right before the door with two little foxpaws tugging at the golden hem of his sleeve.

“Do you want to come meet the cows?” Ranboo asked.

Fundy nodded with dilated pupils.

Philza helped Fundy dress in the winter clothes Technoblade had made the night before, and Ranboo held the door open for Max and Fundy. Fundy had to reach *all* the way up, and Ranboo had to stoop, but the two of them ended up holding hands on the way to the little shack.

“This is Ranmoo, she’s my cow,” Ranboo said once inside, patting Ranmoo on the neck. “She’s very nice, and she’s a dairy cow, so I have to milk her. Do you know how to milk cows?”

Fundy's little head went shake-shake-shake, and Ranboo was struck by how *cute* it was.

"Here, I'll show you."

It wasn't often that *Ranboo* got to show off, given how rarely it was that he knew something other people didn't, but he found he deeply enjoyed walking Fundy through the steps and coaxing Fundy into a try, his black and white hands carefully guiding tiny, thumb-paws on Ranmoo's teats. Sure, it took a lot longer this way, but Ranmoo was patient (and eating) and Ranboo felt *proud* for having taught somebody something.

"And this is Bob," Ranboo said, patting Bob on the side as he also chewed his cud. "Now we just open the gate and let them roam around."

Back inside, Philza brought up the fact that this was usually when they worked on socializing the kittens.

"It's real convenient that you're here. Hard to socialize 'em properly with just three people. Sorta ends up just being 'these three are chill and everyone else is evil' y'know? It's good to get them used to strangers."

"Mm," Wilbur agreed, watching Philza take the crate of kittens from where Ranboo lowered them, Enderchest meowing at his side.

"Not today, Enderchest," he said, scritching her under the chin. "You're not good with people."

"Yeah, mama cat's a little past the window where meeting strangers'll do any good."

"That's fair," Wilbur said, kneeling down and holding Fundy about the waist. "Alright baby now listen. Kittens are *very fragile*. We have to be *extra gentle* when we touch them to make sure we don't hurt them, okay?"

"Okay!" Fundy said, staring at the cage with wide-eyed curiosity.

Ranboo crouched down on the floor, taking the kittens out of the crate one at a time, settling them in the loose pen of his legs. Fundy sat very close, Wilbur cross-legged right behind, and Ranboo held up a little ball of fluff.

"This is Enderpearl," he said, cheeks a little hot from the intense focus that was partially directed at him, but most of *his* attention on the child and kitten in front of him. "She's all black, just like her mama, and she likes to feel sneaky and make mischief when she plays."

"There we go, gently," Wilbur encouraged softly, his hands cupping Fundy's as Ranboo settled Enderpearl into their mutual hold. She sniffed about enthusiastically, meowing and then hissing and then meowing again.

"She's not very used to strangers," Ranboo said, "I don't think she knows how to feel about you yet."

"She's so fuzzy," Fundy said almost-reverently.

"Yeah, and we can pet her, like this, see? Gently, gently," Wilbur guided.

Ranboo smiled. He pet idly at Jjjjjjjeffery as he watched Wilbur's careful handling of Fundy, who in turn carefully admired Enderpearl. Now that he wasn't overwhelmed and caught off-guard, Ranboo felt *much* more kindly towards Wilbur. And, well, their mutual attention was on the kittens, and Ranboo could talk about the kittens!

"They're almost five weeks," Ranboo told Fundy, and by extension, Wilbur. "They're about the age where they're starting to get *really* playful. They like pouncing on my tail, and they've been climbing on everything they can reach."

"We'll need to start weaning 'em. Get them started on softened meats and the like," Philza remarked, observing their little group from his seat on the couch.

Very carefully, Fundy set Enderpearl down in the little donut of Ranboo's legs, and Wilbur praised "*Good*," warmly, something about his tone making a quick little electric shiver crawl up Ranboo's spine even though he wasn't the one it was even directed at.

"This is Jjjjjjjeffery, he's got little socks and white spots. He's very curious and chatty."

As though to prove his point, Jjjjjjjeffery let loose a *loud* meow, wriggling as the strangers held him. He continued to meow, high and shrill and noisy, little paws waving like he could swim through air. Ranboo pet Enderpearl distractedly, and she rolled over to bite and claw at his fingers, only to flip back to her paws just as fast and zoot directly into his leg, falling over on impact. She then, naturally, attacked his leg.

"Enderpearl, shush, it's your brother's turn," Ranboo said quietly, glancing at her briefly before returning his attention to the squirming kitten in the child's grasp. Now, though, it looked as though he was attempting to climb Wilbur's sweater. Ranboo giggled, watching Wilbur struggle to carefully dislodge the kitten while also corralling his child, who wanted Jjjjjjjeffery to stop climbing his arm for a whole different reason. Ranboo leaned forward and carefully unhooked Jjjjjjjeffery's claws from the knit and pressed a quick kiss to his little fuzzy head.

"Fundy, maybe if you sit back down it'll be easier for you to meet Jjjjjjjeffery," Ranboo suggested, an undercurrent of nervousness to his words. He wasn't used to, uh, giving suggestions. Technoblade and Philza were very smart and experienced men, Ranboo couldn't imagine he'd ever had a suggestion for them, even if he could remember it.

But Fundy plopped down no problem, arms outstretched, and Ranboo settled Jjjjjjjeffery against Fundy's chest, both him and Wilbur guiding Fundy's arms to cradle Jjjjjjjeffery there.

It lasted a solid ten seconds before Jjjjjjjeffery started attempting to climb up onto Fundy's shoulder.

Ranboo, Wilbur, and Philza all had a good chuckle over that and Ranboo detached him from the cloth once again.

Technoblade appeared from the ground floor, hopping off the ladder with a small flourish of his cape.

"Hey, kid, come here a second, I've got something for you."

"What is it?" Wilbur asked skeptically, even as Fundy got up and trotted over, ears perked brightly upright and nose wiggling with curiosity. Ranboo felt a little rush of heat flow to his face.

Obviously ‘kid’ was in reference to Fundy, in this situation. Even so, Ranboo looked on curiously, wondering what Technoblade had made Fundy.

“How’s the size and weight of this?” Technoblade asked, ignoring Wilbur’s own question and handing over a small, semi-ornate switchblade.

“NO!” Wilbur exclaimed, scrambling to his own feet and leaving Ranboo and the kittens on the floor, Philza cackling behind them. “Fundy does *not* need a knife!”

“Yet.”

“Techno you aren’t giving my kid a fucking *knife!*”

Technoblade shrugged. “Then I’m giving you a knife, for safekeeping until such a time as you deem ‘old enough.’”

Wilbur groaned, lifting Fundy off the ground and wrestling the knife away in a way that made Ranboo’s tail fluff out.

“You are *insufferable!*”

“People need knives, Will. We gave you your first one when you were, what, eight?”

“Seven, which Fundy is *not!*” Wilbur paused, and Ranboo saw a light go off in his head, loose curls framing his face attractively. “Wait, ‘we gave?’”

“Don’t start.”

“Why, Technoblade,” Wilbur crooned smugly, hoisting Fundy up onto his hip. “Was that an admission of involvement in my upbringing that I just heard?”

“It was not.”

“It sounded an *awful* lot like a sneaky little slip of the tongue.”

“I acknowledge that I was *present* in Phil’s life when he was raising you,” Technoblade conceded, “I have never claimed otherwise, and I helped arm you because unarmed people can get easily offed by baby zombies.”

“It was *one* time!” Philza groaned, dragging a hand down his face and leaning against the couch back. Ranboo reflexively scooped Enderpearl up and deposited her back inside his little leg fence when she tried to climb her way over his thigh.

“And it’s one thing we’ll hold over your head for the rest of your life,” Wilbur agreed with a self-satisfied air. “Now, back to Technoblade.”

“Not back to Technoblade.”

“Would you say that it was fatherly instincts that drove you to arm a seven year old so I could protect myself?”

“I don’t have those and I’m not your stupid dad, Will. I am equally interested in protecting you *and* killing you myself.”

Wilbur nodded faux-thoughtfully. "Like a brother."

"Not like a brother!"

Philza was really set to laughing now, doing the little gasps that came with laughing too much and breathing not enough, and Ranboo found himself joining in.

Yeah, this wasn't too different from what he was used to. He smiled, observing Wilbur and Technoblade as they continued to banter. Yeah, yeah, he was alright.

Chapter End Notes



Y'all will not believe this but I have FANART!!!!!! Thank you to the lovely [idiotbyassociation](#) [felidaefighter](#) and [daydream.animations](#) for your WONDERFUL works of art!!!! Look at my booooooooooys <3 <3 <3 <3

I have finished yet another doll! Come look at [Captain Puffy](#).

Thank you again one and all for your feedback and support, reading your comments is the highlight of my days <3 <3 <3

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Early update this week cause I've got Things tomorrow. We maaaaay be looking at a Sunday update schedule from now on, depending on how the chips fall. I'll keep y'all in the loop

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ultimately, Wilbur hadn't been lying when he told Philza that he and Fundy would only be staying for a short while. Ranboo had barely gotten used to the idea of having them around when Wilbur let them know it was about time for him to start planning his route home.

"I got a map from the same town I got Bob in," Technoblade remarked, rifling through a chest and pulling out the roll of paper. "It's not big, but it shows the nearest city, and you could probably buy a larger one there."

"What, not going to take a preschooler through the Nether?" Philza joked.

Wilbur leaned over the table, Philza joining them and hooking a wing loosely over Wilbur's shoulder, Ranboo rounding on Technoblade's side and looking curiously. He. Was not great at reading maps? But, hm, he was pretty sure he recognized the landscape in the corner, with an ocean and the village he felt fairly certain was their village. Yeah, he was like, *mostly* sure that was their village. So that meant... that little divot right there, was where they lived?

"I'd want to come with," Technoblade remarked, pointing out the city near the bottom of the map. "I need to stop by their church; I've been meaning to for ages. If we leave in the morning we should get there maybe an hour or two before nightfall."

"And I'd come with just for the act of seeing you off," Philza remarked, "We could make a little trip out of it?" Philza looked to Ranboo, and then Technoblade and Wilbur were also looking at Ranboo, and his cheeks heated and he glanced to the side.

"Um, sure?" He hadn't really... been in a city since Technoblade rescued him. His experiences with the city he *had* been in were. Hm. Actually, had he ever set foot outside his master's estate? He wasn't... he couldn't remember.

It did seem like the kind of place that would have lots of noises and crowds, but, if he was *expecting* them, this time, maybe he could handle it?

A part of him did want to be redeemed, for his earlier failure with Wilbur, if he was being honest. He was free. He was acting free. He wouldn't need comforted just because he was around strangers, he wouldn't freak out just because he was around strangers. Fundy was around strangers and had never seemed bothered by it! So Ranboo wouldn't be either. He'd do better, this go. If he was anticipating crowds and noise, then he'd be braced for it.

"Pog," Technoblade remarked idly. "We'll bring Carl for when Fundy gets tired. Or Philza, since he's an old man now."

“Hey!” Philza laughed, lifting his wing off Wilbur’s shoulder to knock Technoblade backside the head, “What does that make you?”

“Listen man, *I’m* not a grandpa.”

Ranboo laughed along, used to Philza and Technoblade’s familiar banter, the way they played off each other.

“What about Max?” Fundy asked from where the two of them were a grey-and-orange mound of fluff on the floor.

“Hm,” Technoblade observed his dog. “We’ll bring a lead with us for when we’re around other people, just to make sure he doesn’t go saying hi to anyone who’s allergic, but yeah, Max can come.”

“We,” Ranboo started, locking up when everyone’s attention landed back on him. He swallowed nervously, eyes falling to the floor, but continued, “We should leave extra feed out for the cows, maybe?”

“Yeah,” Philza said with a nod, “We’ll leave whenever you’ve finished milking Ranmoo tomorrow morning and we’ll just have to remember to grab her when we get back the next evening.”

Ranboo nodded. He was sure the cows would be fine for a night. They were fenced in, and mobs didn’t usually care about livestock or animals anyway.

Briefly, Ranboo wondered how a zombie or skeleton could even tell the difference. Surely, to them, meat was meat, right? He decided to tune back into the conversation before his brain could run too far down that rabbit hole.

“...no windbreakers, even if we get direct sunlight it’s going to be bitter cold. Better to take the long route than risk frostbite on kid toes,” Technoblade was saying, mapping out his recommended course with his fingers. Ranboo nodded when Philza did, pretending he understood (and had been paying attention the whole time).

Their path selected, Philza began listing various food items he’d send back with Wilbur and Fundy, and Technoblade rolled up the map and set it next to a slowly-growing pile of gear he clearly intended them all to take, everyone’s movements unrushed and relaxed.

Ranboo had not, in the time Wilbur had been present, felt *relaxed*, but he did feel positively now, so, that was nice. The kittens now tolerated being held and maneuvered by strangers, and Fundy and Ranboo had distributed *many* kisses on their sweet little heads.

That night, when he was curled between Technoblade and Philza’s sleeping forms, he felt faintly... something. Too jittery to fall asleep right away. The thought of a city made him... anxious. What if people saw him and *knew*? What if someone singled him out and demanded he act like a slave again? More realistically, what if the motion and noise all got too much for him in the middle of a city with no quieter rooms for him to hide in, far from home with no cat and nothing to ground himself on? What if they didn’t like that he was half-Enderman? What if the city *golem* didn’t like that he was half-Enderman? The idea that one of the giants might one day turn and strike at *him* with its giant fists and heavy blows sickened Ranboo; he’d crumple like crushed twigs.

Or! What if! Everything went *fine*! Technoblade would be there, and while Ranboo was *determined* not to be a bother or be overly needy and clingy, he knew Technoblade wouldn't let anyone kill him. Right? Right. Philza wouldn't either, for that matter. They were kind to him, gracious, patient, understanding. Technoblade had even expressed that he... understood Ranboo's situation, more or less. They'd be fine. It'd just be a day of travel, a night in town, and a day of travel home. Easy peasy lemon squeezy.

...Ranboo should bring a lemon with him, actually. Just. Just in case. He pulled his memory book from his inventory, pressed it as lightly as he could against Technoblade's slowly rising and falling chest, and just wrote "lemon" as quickly and quietly as he could, the skritch of the pen on paper seeming *boomingly* loud in Ranboo's ears.

But sleep did eventually come, and so did morning. They were not *rushed* to get out of the house, but the day started bright and early with the dawn, and as Ranboo scurried off to care for the cows the others began prepping Carl and going over what they were bringing.

Oh! Lemon! Right! Uncertainly, Ranboo paused in his milking to tilt his head, jaw working as he flicked the communicator on and shoved his thoughts in a distinctly *Technoblade* direction.

"Could you, um, pack a lemon for me?" Ranboo asked.

"Sure," came Technoblade's easy answer, and Ranboo resumed milking. Okay, good good good. Nice. Nice! And he hadn't even needed to reference his memory book for that one.

When he rejoined the group, Ranmoo and Bob wandering into the little paddock they still hadn't taken down but *not* the larger property fencing (Ranboo was paranoid about the mobs, so sue him), Technoblade held out the lemon for him.

"Thank you," Ranboo said quietly, taking the lemon and slipping it into his inventory.

Technoblade held open his cape, and the alluring warmth of Technoblade's side beckoned, but Ranboo smiled and shook his head. He was fine.

"Just, uh, just in case, I wanted, to be prepared," he explained himself haltingly, tucking one of his longer bangs just behind the shell of his ear and then tugging at his fingers so his knuckles popped.

Technoblade allowed the cape to fall with a shallow nod, turning back to the group.

Ranboo was nervous, at first, Fundy bundled up in blankets on Carl's back, Wilbur complaining about the morning cold around a yawn, Philza and Technoblade snickering at him, and the day stretching out ahead. Then Ranboo rapidly grew bored.

It wasn't like travelling through the Nether, terrifying and exhausting and strange. For one thing, Ranboo was well-rested and trusted at least two people he was travelling with, probably all four if he was using a generous definition of "trust." And the scenery was much more beautiful here, though staring at snow and pine trees and snow and spruce trees and snow did lose its novelty after a while. Particularly since he lived in this biome. At least Max never ran out of things to sniff.

Fundy woke up enough to get wiggly, and Ranboo and Wilbur both let out small, urgent noises and rushed to Carl's side before Fundy found a much *quicker* way off the horse than anyone might like.

“Fundy baby, *ask* for help getting down!” Wilbur scolded mildly, more concerned than anything, letting the child loose upon the snow. Ranboo hovered until little booted feet were prancing about, and then let out a small breath. Okay, no falling-off-horse injuries were sustained (yet).

“So Ranboo, tell me about yourself!” Wilbur prompted, and Ranboo looked to him in surprise. That, wasn’t what he was expecting.

“Um?”

“I’ve spent so much time chatting with dad and Techno I really haven’t had the chance to speak with you. That, and, well,” Wilbur laughed, sounding half chagrined and rubbing gloved hands over the back of his neck, “I know you’re not as much for strangers out of nowhere as some people are. But!” Wilbur smiled brightly at him, Ranboo’s breath doing a funny little thing seeing him haloed by dawn and glinting snow, “If we’re going to be half-brothers or whatever we are now that you’re family, I figured we should get to know each other!”

“Oh, oh, um,” Ranboo stuttered, face flushed and twisting at his gloves anxiously. “I, I’m not, I—I’m not, family, I just, live with them. A-and they’re kind to me, I’m, they’re not—” Ranboo cut off his stupid fumbling with hunched shoulders and his tail thrashing behind him, though kept close to his legs.

Wilbur stared at him a long moment, the intensity making Ranboo’s cheeks flush even *hotter*, before shrugging and facing forward once again.

“Well, whatever you are: tell me about yourself!”

“I’m, uhh,” Ranboo floundered, tugging at his bangs, the hair at his nape, adjusting his coat’s sleeves, “What, would you like to know?”

“Anything!” Wilbur insisted brightly, kicking a pebble forward and taking up a bootful of snow along with it. “All I know is that Techno and Phil took you in and now you live with them, and also that social anxiety’s a real bitch. You’re polite, you’re quiet.” Wilbur shrugged, then smiled again in that half-askew way that, combined with the curls against his forehead and slightly crooked nose, gave him a very *charming* look. “So really, anything at all.”

“I’m half-Enderman?” He didn’t know how to answer, what to say.

“What’s the other half?”

“I don’t, um, I don’t remember. I, have a bad memory. So I have to write down things, if I want to be able to remember them. And. Um.” What else even was there? “Water burns me. I like animals, I’m pretty good with them. I think I was even good with them back when I was still a slave.”

“I’m gonna need you to go over that last one again?” Wilbur said, voice gone high and his feet stumbling slightly.

“Oh, uh, since my memory is bad, I don’t *actually* know for sure if I was good with animals? But I think I was, I—”

“I, ah, mm, hm—Slave?”

Ranboo stared at Wilbur's twisted brow and pressed lips, confusion and its ever-present partner of trepidation rising in him.

"I'm, not anymore."

"Well yes I'd *gathered that*, I was more—ah, I just." Wilbur ran a hand over his face. "Hadn't known that! Now I do."

"Oh. I guess, I guess I'd just assumed, since you were talking with Philza and Technoblade so much, that they'd told you?"

"Ahhh, no, no, that seems like something they'd let you tell me, if you wanted to. I, wow, okay, you were a slave, I feel like that recontextualizes some things, namely the fact that you did in fact move in with them. I'd just thought it was empty-nest syndrome," Wilbur said, canting his head in Ranboo's direction with a shrug and wave of his hand.

"Oh, I think, um, I think Philza mentioned something like that?" Ranboo said, searching his memory. The phrase "empty nest" certainly rang a bell. He took out his memory book to check, but whatever the memory was, he hadn't written that detail down.

"So what's that then?" Wilbur asked.

"Oh, my memory book. Since my memory is so bad I have to uh," Ranboo gestured to it vaguely, tensing when Wilbur drew close. The man casually leaned an elbow up on Ranboo's "shoulder" (he was a bit too short to actually reach, for all he seemed taller than most humans (Ranboo was pretty sure)), and Ranboo snapped the book closed before he could peer at any of the words he'd written. Wilbur, thankfully, took the hint, and backed off, hands raised and an apologetic smile on his face.

He smiled a lot, Ranboo mused.

"Sorry, sorry, too curious for my own good."

Fundy yipped ahead of them, drawing their attention, and Wilbur rushed a half step forward before realizing Fundy was just snarling at a berry bush. Must have caught on a pant leg or sleeve or somesuch.

"You alright baby?" Wilbur asked, and Fundy's ears swiveled adorably. Wilbur held out his arms and Fundy trotted into them, presenting a furry little cheek for kissing. Ranboo smiled, heart a little fluttery. It seemed instinctual, *knowing* that that's what Wilbur was going to do. And, of course, he did, murmuring, "You're too curious for your own good too, huh? Already taking after me."

Fundy wriggled down, much too excited to *stay* held in fatherly arms, and Wilbur flashed a smile, beckoning Ranboo to hop-skip the next few steps forward and pull even with him again, Carl following along behind like a good horse. Anxiously, Ranboo glanced ahead to make sure Technoblade and Philza were still there and within sight, but of course they were.

"But alright then," Wilbur said, hands in his pockets and breath misting from between his lips, "So what all happened with you and those two? If I can ask; I don't mean to step on anything private." He tilted his head towards Philza and Technoblade, and Ranboo supposed that was a fair question.

"They—Technoblade—saved me. Um." Ranboo was pretty sure he could remember the story well enough, but he checked over his memory book just to make sure. He nodded to himself, Wilbur

quiet (for the first time *ever*) as he waited on Ranboo. “Yeah, I was, Technoblade had been caught ___”

“Oh I’m going to *lord* that over him.”

Ranboo snickered. “And, and I was, my master’s estate only had one cell, so we had to share it. That was how I met him.”

“What had *you* done to deserve getting locked up with his type?” Wilbur asked skeptically, and Ranboo shrugged.

“I don’t remember. I’d upset my master, somehow, and since I’m, uh, panicky? A-and it was always worse, back then, too. So, he’d lock me away until I wore myself out.”

Wilbur let out a low whistle. Ranboo reflexively mimicked the noise, his coming out a little higher than Wilbur’s.

“So what, Techno busted out and took you with him?”

“Sort of,” Ranboo said, fiddling with his hair and looking anywhere other than Wilbur’s face. “He uh, he was. They were going to execute him? And so they brought him out to this little... area, and,” Ranboo felt a small surge of adrenaline even at the memory, “And he ripped the post he was chained to out of the ground.”

Wilbur laughed brightly.

“*Then*, he grabbed me, and we went through the Nether? Which was. Kind of awful, actually!” Ranboo nodded quick little jerks as he spoke. “It really kind of sucked. But he was very kind to me, so...” Ranboo shrugged.

“Yeah, he’s a real softie under all that dickishness of his.”

“I, uh, think that’s, maybe just a you thing?”

Wilbur laughed, *loud* and snorting and kind of ugly in a cute way.

“What, you don’t think he’s a total and complete asshole?”

“No,” Ranboo said, heart fluttering. “I don’t think you’re right at all.”

Wilbur continued to snicker. “Mate I think that’s a *you* thing. You’ve really only seen him interact with you and dad—Philza—right?”

Ranboo nodded.

“Yeah, take it from me. Everyone else in the world, he’s just the *worst*. Nice guy, ultimately, but just a total pain.”

“He’s nice to Fundy.”

“Fundy is barely more than a toddler and also objectively adorable.”

“He’s—” Hm. Yeah. Ranboo hadn’t really seen him talk to anyone other than this single group of people. And, presumably, his old master, but he certainly wasn’t going to remember any of *those* conversations. “You’re the only person out of four he’s rude to, and you’re, um, you’re,” Ranboo felt his heart in his throat but finished, “you’re rude to him first.”

Wilbur tapped a finger to his nose and then levelled it at Ranboo. “Got me there!”

Ranboo laughed, half with nerves, and oh gee. Maybe they should’ve had a conversation a little closer to town, this was *nerve-wracking*. Ultimately pleasant, yeah, but. Strange. And he was keyed up.

“So how’d you end up moving in with Philza then?”

“Um,” Ranboo checked his memory book. “Technoblade went to get Philza, who, had been in trouble? And brought him home.”

“Wait, okay, so you met Phil *after* the move?”

Ranboo nodded with a little hum.

“Alright. Must’ve been quite the adjustment.”

“It, wasn’t the easiest thing I’ve ever done,” Ranboo admitted bashfully. “But, good. They’re kind people.”

“They are,” Wilbur agreed fondly, looking ahead at their backs, sunlight glinting off his glasses frames. “So now it’s just you three in the middle of nowhere? You don’t miss anybody?”

Ranboo shook his head. “I didn’t, uh, have, friends. At all, when, when—” and it was strange, wasn’t it, that something that had once felt so natural to him now felt awkward to speak of directly, “—before.”

“That’s a pity. I wish I’d known you sooner; I would’ve been your friend.”

Ranboo flustered at that, vocalizing, cheeks puffed out with pursed lips. Ahead of them, Technoblade’s ears flicked upright at attention, and he paused, waiting for their little group to catch up with him and Philza.

For a man with such short legs, Philza sure moved fast.

“Hey,” Technoblade said, Wilbur once again pairing off with his father as the two drifted after Fundy, “You alright?”

He placed a hand on Ranboo’s back, right between the shoulderblades, and normally that touch would’ve been so calming and safe but Ranboo was too keyed up and the touch right on top of his *spine* made that worse and something about Wilbur and Wilbur’s whole—*existence* left Ranboo feeling off-kilter and *weird* so he side-stepped out of the touch, nodding vigorously.

“I, I’m fine, just, a little nervous is all,” he hedged. He wasn’t honestly all that sure himself, why he felt like this.

Technoblade’s hand hovered midair a brief moment, then dropped back beneath his cape. “Okay. Just wanted to check in.”

“Mmm,” Ranboo hummed, then again, because the noise felt good in his throat and in his brain, and behind him his tail was thrashing and twitching and wouldn’t *stop* twitching. It was getting so much snow in it, he just knew it. Probably twigs and pine needles too.

Technoblade watched him, his eyes heavy and just making the tension in Ranboo *worse*. “Uh, um. Are we—how, far have we travelled, so far?” Ranboo asked, anything to convince Technoblade and Wilbur and everyone to please just stop perceiving him for a little while.

“Not very. If we need to turn around and head back, I could drop you off at home and catch up with them without much trouble.”

Ranboo shook his head so hard he saw spots for a moment, brain going all weird in his skull. “No, no, no, that’s not why I—I wasn’t asking to—sorry! Sorry, I’m just. Sorry.” Ranboo pulled on his fingers and glanced around, Technoblade tense next to him, which was *not* helping Ranboo’s own tension.

“...Not to pry, but are you sure you’re okay?”

Ranboo nodded, worrying his lip. “I’m fine. I just—need a quick breather? Alone?” he asked hesitantly, eyeing Technoblade’s jaw for signs of disapproval.

He didn’t, uh, look particularly happy, but he didn’t look mad or scold Ranboo either.

“Yeah. Carl’s saddle is open, I’ll just be ahead,” Technoblade said, and Ranboo was left mercifully alone for a moment. He did walk close to Carl, but rather than mounting he slung an arm around the horse’s neck and took deep breaths, removing his gloves so he could rub his hands on Carl’s horse-hair for that good good texture. Carl bore it stoically, letting Ranboo half-hide against him and breathe in familiar horse-smell.

By the time Fundy needed to ride again, Ranboo was okay.

By the time they broke for lunch, Ranboo felt *genuinely* fine. He’d just needed a moment, and this time he’d actually managed it! Miracles never cease.

Around dinnertime, they caught sight of the city in the distance, and Ranboo’s nerves made a comeback. That was. Much larger than the villages they lived near. But he was fine. He would be *fine*! He knew it was going to be large, he knew it was going to be crowded, he’d known all along that there would be people and noise and he’d just stay close to Technoblade and Philza and he’d be *fine*.

“Finally,” Technoblade said as they passed through the city gates, the whole polis sprawled out on either side of a river, their group entering from the upper portion of the hill. “I’m going ahead to the church to buy a blessed bell. If they don’t have any for sale I’m stealing the church bell.”

“Techno do *not* steal the church bell!” Philza shouted, feathers fluffing.

“If they don’t. Have any, for sale—” Technoblade repeated, speedwalking away.

“Technoooooooooooooooooh boy there he goes.” Philza shook his head with a small, low chuckle.

“Alright! Better chase after him then.”

“See Ranboo, this is what I was saying about him being an arse,” Wilbur insisted, Ranboo hoisting Fundy up onto Carl’s saddle at the behest of upstretched little arms.

“Mm,” Ranboo hummed noncommittally, grabbing Carl by the reins while Philza slipped a lead around Max’s neck. Ranboo frowned, and glanced around.

“Where’s Twitch?”

“Eh, they’ll be along when they feel like it. Probably off rollin’ around in the snow or picking fights with things they shouldn’t. City wall should be easy enough for ‘em to fly over so I’m not worried about them getting too lost.”

Max was, thankfully, apparently leash-broken on top of all his other good habits, and Ranboo once again wondered why someone would abandon such a well-trained dog. Maybe something unfortunate had happened to his last owners. They were stopped three, maybe four times on the way to the church, a couple of kids and a pair of women asking to pet Max, who delightedly received all of it. Ranboo was glad to stay pressed close to Carl, eyes taken off his strange height and strange skin and strange species by an adorable dog.

They passed by one of the city’s golems, and Ranboo shuddered, muffling the whimpering sound in his throat only by the sheer desire to not attract attention to himself.

It didn’t hurt him.

But it looked.

Fundy’s little paw on Ranboo’s shoulder (well... upper arm) snapped him out of it, head swishing down to look. Fundy was staring at him with big eyes from the saddle, and Ranboo offered a weak smile.

“The golems make me nervous,” he explained quietly. Fundy nodded.

“They’re taller than you are.”

Ranboo... couldn’t say why he found that funny. But he laughed, an airy, cracking sound.

“Yeah. They’re broader than Technoblade is.”

Fundy nodded, considering that gravely.

“But they’re safe.” Fundy looked to Wilbur. “They protect us.”

“That’s right,” Wilbur agreed brightly. “They keep zombies and skeletons away from people when the torchlight fails, and help protect against raiders if someone starts attacking citizens.”

How about Endermen? Ranboo thought, *How about whatever else I’m made of?*

(Golems didn’t have problems with mobs that didn’t make problems, and Endermen were known as... reasonably passive. Even so, while a golem might not attack an Enderman first, their type wasn’t generally welcome in populated spaces full of people who might make eye contact (their type didn’t generally want to be in populated spaces in the first place, fortunately.))

The sound of bells grew steadily louder. They turned a corner, and Ranboo caught sight of the church, made of quartz and wood painted purple. A golden, blessed bell hung in front of it, and passerby would ring it, pause, and continue on their way.

Ranboo had never—that he remembered—been to a church before. He examined the people there curiously, though he couldn't make sense of what they were doing. In past the opened doors, Ranboo caught sight of Technoblade conversing with a man draped in long purple and white robes, but his attention was once again pulled by the sound of someone ringing the bell out front.

Nerves crawled in his skin, and he turned to catch sight of Philza examining him.

“You know, Techno's brought up wanting a bell for a while now, but did we ever explain to you what the bell's for?” Philza asked, casual as can be, and Ranboo shook his head. Was that bad, that he didn't know?

“It's the main component in a common minor ritual. You pray for fortune on it.”

“Pray for... fortune?”

“Yeah,” Philza said, watching Wilbur guide Fundy to the bell and then squat so Fundy could balance on his knees. “Wealth, good luck, general positive vibes, whatever kind of fortune you like. Or you can do like me and just not specify.”

Ranboo frowned, watching Wilbur talk Fundy through it, his words inaudible from here.

“How, how do you—what do you say?”

Philza shrugged. “Depends on the person. Some people speak out loud when they do it. Helps them direct their thoughts? I know when Techno prays he gets Chat to do this whole chanting thing. I think it started as a joke? But now whenever he rings a blessed bell they go ‘One of us!’ over and over really loud. When Will was little he would say a very specific, ‘Hello Universe, Please May I Have Fortune To Get A New Book I Want’ or whatever it was that he was praying for. For me it's just sort of a,” Philza wagged his hand back and forth. “Vibe? Like using a communicator, almost, but instead of aiming for a contact I'm just aiming... ‘up’ I guess? Out, maybe, is a better way of putting it. And instead of words it's just sort of this *feeling* that I'm pushing out, the actual act of wanting.”

Wilbur set Fundy down and stood, then rang the bell, clapped his hands with closed eyes a moment, then smiled and took Fundy's paw.

“Want to try it?”

Ranboo looked at Philza again, back at the bell, in the church doors for Technoblade (he wasn't there anymore), and nodded slowly. Philza crossed to the bell, Max on one side and Ranboo on the other, Carl following along after him, and Ranboo watched as Philza rang the bell, clapped his hands, smiled with a distant look in his eyes, and then side-stepped so Ranboo would have room.

“However suits you best,” Philza encouraged, taking Carl's reins, “There's no wrong way to do it.”

Ranboo rang the bell, clapped his hands together in front of him like he'd seen Wilbur and Philza do, and...

Uh, hello Universe? I'm. Praying for fortune.

He guessed... that was it...? He looked at Philza, who nodded encouragingly, and Ranboo took the reins back meekly. Okay. He didn't feel very different, but it was a *minor* ritual after all.

"Well I've done everything I set out to do today," Technoblade announced as he strode through the church doors, lifting the blessed bell in his hand for them to see. "See you losers later."

"Heh?" Ranboo gasped, *What?!*

"That was a joke, Ranboo," Philza assured, patting him on the arm as Wilbur and Technoblade once again set to bickering, walking aimlessly as they did so.

"...else to do?" Ranboo caught Technoblade saying, his attention split between the argument and Philza's kind words.

"Oh piss off. You got your bell from the wrong deity anyway!"

"A blessed bell is a blessed bell; it doesn't *matter* which deity blesses it!"

"You're just mad there aren't any temples left for fucking—"

"There *are* they're just *rarer* now."

"Deity...?" Ranboo asked hesitantly.

"The church we just visited—oh how do I explain this," Philza huffed, blowing a bang from his face.

"The current dominant religion is called the Path of Prime. Following the religion is called 'Walking the Path of Prime' or 'Walking the Prime Path.' I walk the Prime Path because it's convenient, I don't really have any strong feelings for one or the other, right?" Philza explained, gesturing side to side with his open palms. "Prime is derived, more or less, from what *used* to be the dominant religion, Eut'Oob, which is an old god that Technoblade still honors. He and Will are the ones who've actually, like, examined the differences in the practices—since Prime sorta... shifted in *from* Eut'Oob there are a lot of similarities. I don't know personally, you'd have to ask one of them."

"Oh," Ranboo said thoughtfully, watching Philza leash Max in from sniffing at a clump of roadkill that had flies buzzing all over it. Not for dogs.

"Techno is also an acolyte for another, older god simply known as the Blood God, but that one isn't gonna have popular or common ceremonies or artifacts you can find just lying around anywhere," Philza continued with a chuckle.

Ranboo nodded. "And, Technoblade is, religious, right?" He pulled out his memory book to check. Oh! He should write down about how to do the fortune prayer in there.

"I mean I think he's fuckin' superstitious—"

"I can hear you!"

“Then you come explain it to him! Leave me doin’ this on my own while you and Will go at it again, you arseholes.”

“I am *not* superstitious,” Technoblade insisted, falling back and walking on Ranboo’s other side, patting at Carl’s neck. “I just happen to *closely* subscribe to the practices and traditions of my *chosen* religion. S. Religions. Plural, sort of, the Blood God is a little less... formal.”

Ranboo jotted that down too, while he had his notebook open.

Fundy yipped, and Ranboo looked up to see that Wilbur’s sleeve was once again being tugged on. Oh, the lot in life of a father’s clothes.

In their aimless meandering, they seemed to have gravitated to a merchants’ alley, street food and trinkets and peddled goods lining the cobblestone pathway.

Wilbur lifted Fundy up onto a hip and their group gathered around a cart of sweets and small cakes. “Fundy, baby, we haven’t even eaten dinner yet, you’ll ruin your appetit—Techno!”

Technoblade dropped a couple of gold nuggets into the merchant’s palm and pulled a small cake and the sachet of marble candies Fundy had been pointing to from the wares. He stuck the cake in his mouth and pulled the sachet open, giving the largest marble candy to Fundy and holding the bag over for Philza and Ranboo.

Ranboo... well, Technoblade was offering. And. He took the first marble candy that fell under his fingers when he reached in, a whirling sugar-glass ball with streaks of red and blue and pink in its center. He popped it in his mouth and let it sloooooowly dissolve on his tongue, sweet and occasionally tangy as he melted through to the colored bits.

Wilbur sighed as he fished out a marble candy for himself, “You’re insufferable. In. Suff. Er. A. Ble.”

Technoblade gripped the cake so it wouldn’t drop and finished the bite, then grinned at him.

Fundy wriggled down and trotted over to another merchant, this one selling kebabs of peppers, meat, and onions that smelled *really* good, and Technoblade bought a stick for each of them, plus a small cut of yet-unseasoned fresh meat that he tossed to Max with a quick whistle.

Fundy caught on before Wilbur did. It wasn’t until maybe the fifth or sixth stall that Fundy led Technoblade to, where he proceeded to buy *whatever* it was that was being pointed at, that Wilbur grouched, “He’s spoiling my kid rotten.”

Philza laughed. “Well, we’ve gotta make sure Fundy’ll pester you into visiting us again *somehow*, don’t we?”

“You’re in on it,” he grumbled, and Ranboo chuckled.

Wilbur made one single purchase, and it was a large map from a cartographer who gave directions on the best route to what was called “The Archmage’s Kingdom.” Twitch joined them, and they ate street food and wandered until the sun was well-set and they were tired enough to seek out an inn, Ranboo accidentally startling someone when his half-Ender body ducked under the doorframe and getting startled in turn at the gasp.

Technoblade pulled Ranboo in close to his side, a welcome reprieve after all the new sights and smells and sounds of the day (good as they'd been, there had been... a lot of them) (actually, he was really quite proud of himself, that he'd handled it all as well as he had).

"Hey, Phil's getting rooms. You're still good to bunk with the two of us?"

Ranboo nodded, brows drawn together. Why wouldn't he be? Had something happened? He checked his memory book, but whatever it might have been, he hadn't written it down. Maybe it was just because they were around other people, and Technoblade was worried about Ranboo feeling childish in front of others?

Well, Ranboo *did* feel childish, but that had less to do with sharing a bed and more to do with the *everything* about his brain and all.

"Alright, night! See you tomorrow morning," Wilbur said, kissing Philza's cheek and clapping Ranboo and Technoblade on the shoulders. The place where his palm had settled burned, tingly and *weird*, and Ranboo's face felt warm again for some reason. The change in temperature, maybe, from being outside all day and now suddenly in the hearth-warmed inn?

The bed was smaller, lengthwise, than the one back home, but that made sense. Ranboo and Technoblade were the outliers, here, in this city full of mostly-humans and normal sized hybrids. And it wasn't like Ranboo didn't curl up against Technoblade anyway. So it was fine, maybe even kind of cozy, for all it wasn't home.

He reached up to his shoulder and gripped lightly at the place Wilbur had touched.

"Wilbur makes me feel strange," he announced, unprompted.

Philza burst into cackling laughter, wing shaking overtop the three of them, and Technoblade deadpanned with, "He's a strange man."

Philza snorted. "Yeah, real oddball he is. He's so good though."

Ranboo smiled and ducked his face in against Technoblade's chest, at the warmth in Philza's tone. "He, yeah, he's, good," Ranboo agreed quietly, his stomach feeling all funny. "I think, I think I'll miss having him and Fundy around."

"You and me both," Philza said, voice going tight as his arms and legs stretched out, wings flaring a moment as well, and then he resettled on the bed. "And Techno, for all he won't admit it."

"I am not going to be missing anybody," Technoblade, predictably, countered.

"Case in point," Philza teased warmly, breath ticklish on the back of Ranboo's neck, and he vwooped quietly and hummed, tail thumping underneath the blanket. Technoblade chuckled, fingers stroking lightly at Ranboo's hair, and next thing he knew it was morning.

Saying goodbye to Wilbur and Fundy wasn't overly emotional, mostly just a bit more light scolding from Philza to call more often and Fundy "sneaking" in an extra round of hugs from everybody, and then their groups split and Ranboo was riding on Carl, perched right in front of Technoblade.

He opened his memory book. He was pretty sure... yeah! Yeah, okay, yes, he *did* remember, yeah, right, he'd ridden like this before, back in the first trip in the Nether. Right.

“Welp,” Philza said with a stretch of his wings (eyespots, big eyespots, hhhg, bad), “Twitch and I are gonna go for a morning flight. You two enjoy your conversation.”

Ranboo’s brow furrowed. Conversation? He watched Philza and Twitch take off, Carl continuing to plod along the path, but the man’s back offered no answers. He looked to Technoblade, but locked up when he saw the man’s lips pressed tight beneath his mask, eyes following Philza.

What. What conversation?

“Sir?” he asked quietly, barely more than a whisper.

Technoblade sighed.

“Have I... upset you, or made you uncomfortable lately?”

Ranboo’s tail curled in tightly against his lap, legs lifting despite him riding side-saddle and Carl not exactly being the flattest of surfaces to curl up on. “No?”

The moment hung anxiously between them, Technoblade looking like he’d swallowed something distasteful, and then he released a heavy breath and ran his hand up under his mask. Ranboo’s ears pinned back.

“So, I have ADHD,” he stated, dropping his hand out in front of him with fingers splayed, not looking at Ranboo. “Which does a lot of things in my brain, but specifically, it makes me... sensitive, to perceived rejection,” he said slowly. “I’ve noticed the last couple of days you haven’t been—I have—” Technoblade swore quietly under his breath. “Where’s Puffy when you need her?” he muttered, barely audible.

He took in a deep breath and straightened. “You usually like it when I touch you or give you my cape. Is there a reason you haven’t wanted that, lately?”

And it clicked, it clicked together in Ranboo’s head, the same question he’d attempted to ask countless times in his own life.

Have I done something wrong?

That Technoblade, that, that *Technoblade* would be the one asking, that *Ranboo* had somehow—but

“I, I didn’t,” Ranboo slid his arms around Technoblade’s neck and hugged him, burying his face in the fur at the crook of his neck and wrapping his tail around behind him, “I’m sorry, I didn’t, I didn’t think about how you would see it.”

Technoblade wrapped his strong arms around Ranboo’s thin waist, shifting his head so that his mask rested awkwardly perched on Ranboo’s head and his nose pressed to Ranboo’s hair, holding him close. “So you’re not upset with me,” he clarified.

“No! No no no no no no no,” Ranboo rushed, trying to curl up somehow closer, clinging to him tightly.

Ranboo was pretty sure he hadn’t imagined the way Technoblade breathed out, the way his body lost a degree of tension. “Okay,” he said, quiet and low, “Okay, so what *is* happening in your head, Ranboo? I can’t know unless you tell me.”

“I, I’m just,” Ranboo tried nervously, but what should he say? He opened his memory book one-handed, the other still wrapped around Technoblade’s neck and fingers twisting in the fur. “I—” But no, his memory book couldn’t help him here. “I don’t know?” he offered, knowing it wouldn’t be a satisfactory answer.

“Breathe,” Technoblade instructed, cupping the side of Ranboo’s face and prompting him to trill. “Take a breath, kid, you’re not being timed on this. No one’s upset with you, I’m just,” Technoblade frowned, searched for words, “trying to understand.”

Ranboo would like to understand himself, too. He’d also like to take time and search for words, like Technoblade did, he would, he would mimic Technoblade. Ranboo pressed against him again, curled small and hunched and burrowed in, and when Technoblade reached out and draped his cape across Ranboo’s back, Ranboo hummed.

“It, feels like I’m a bother,” Ranboo said, because it did. Here he was, upsetting Technoblade, making him worry, making him fuss, sharing his cape, “It feels, I—I hate making you worry over nothing.”

“You’re not making me worry over nothing,” Technoblade assured.

“I just—” don’t want to annoy you, can’t *say* ‘I don’t want to annoy you’ because what if that means I’m not ‘adjusting’ well enough, fast enough, I don’t want to make you feel like someone else could fix me ‘better’ than you can, I don’t want to fail at the only real task you’ve given me, I want your approval so bad it aches, I can’t say that because you’re not my master, I still want you to be my master, I still want someone else to make my decisions for me because choices are *hard*, but if I indicate that, if I let that slip, you’ll be upset with me again, I can’t stand it when you’re upset, but you warned me that you *would* be and that part of the deal that I could still live with you was that I’d have to just deal with that, I want to deal with that, I’m frustrated that I *can’t* deal with that, and I can’t say any of it, any of it at all, because I don’t know what counts as ‘enough’ and what will make it clear I’ve fallen short and make me *lose you*—

Ranboo *keened*.

“Shhh, hey,” Technoblade squeezed him briefly, then ran a hand up and down his back. “Hey, hey, easy Ranboo. Take your time. We’ve got all day.”

But Ranboo didn’t want to waste Technoblade’s whole day.

“I don’t *want* to need comforted so often,” Ranboo whined, and maybe that was good enough, maybe that toed the line between his failings and proof that he was trying, he was trying *so hard*.

“You’re frustrated,” Technoblade mused, and Ranboo whined again.

“Yes. ”

“That’s normal,” Technoblade assured, his palm still warm and firm and familiar on Ranboo’s back, stroking slowly. Ranboo’s tail twitched, bapping against Carl’s rear, and he let out a string of garbled vocalizations that made Technoblade snort.

“Hey, hey, listen to me,” Technoblade prompted, shifting Ranboo only as far as was needed for Ranboo to glance up at his chin. “If it’s a matter of pride, I’m not trying to step on your toes. Your business is your business. But it’s *okay* if you need comforted, even if it’s often.”

“I’m going to annoy you,” Ranboo grumbled.

“Then I’ll be annoyed.” Technoblade shrugged. “It’s not going to kill me, Ranboo, heck, you *just* met Wilbur. You’re a cakewalk compared to that guy.”

Ranboo snorted, pressing his face back into Technoblade’s furred neckline. “He is a lot.”

“He’s so much.”

Ranboo chuckled weakly, hands buried in the white fluff at Technoblade’s nape. Then he hummed.

“Thank you,” Ranboo said quietly. “And. I’m sorry, that I made you feel like I was rejecting you. I didn’t, didn’t mean to.”

“Yeah,” Technoblade said, placing a palm against Ranboo’s spine, reclaiming Carl’s reins and urging him forward just a little faster. “Just needed to check in.”

And wasn’t it just such a *fascinating* thought? That Ranboo, that *Ranboo*, could affect others? Not just annoy them, he’d always known that much, but that his words and actions could actually have an *impact* on the lives of the people around him. That Technoblade valued his opinion of him and took it personally when Ranboo withdrew. That Ranboo’s actions, even small ones, could actually sit inside someone else’s brain and *mean* something.

He wasn’t used to that. He’d annoyed others, made them angry, inconvenienced them with clumsy hands and his weird biology, but he’d never, as far as he could remember, *affected* anyone before.

He took out his memory book. Once again, he wasn’t quite sure... *what* to write.

Technoblade doesn't like being rejected

Okay. Good start, he guessed.

when I pull away from him or try to handle problems on my own when he's offered help, that counts as rejection

Okay but the point the point the *point!*?

I take up space in other people's lives. My actions affect them.

Ranboo frowned at the page. Reveal your secrets, oh papery one.

Technoblade and Philza are kind to me, I should be courteous back. I should think about their feelings too.

Technoblade says it's okay that I still need comforted frequently.

Philza flew off so we could speak privately after we left the city. Wilbur and Fundy left this morning.

Okay, okay that should be good. Ranboo closed the book, and nodded to himself, then flopped against Technoblade bonelessly. Yeah, okay. That should be good.

I made [Niki!](#)

As always, any comments, concrit, or feedback you have to offer are profoundly appreciated
<3

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

CW: Minor character death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was maybe a week after Wilbur and Fundy had left.

Life had returned to normal. The kittens were endlessly energetic, if Ranboo wasn't pregnant it wasn't for lack of trying, Max and Carl had taken to racing playfully, Ranboo had his routine of mining and helping out around the house, Philza had some sort of ongoing potions project in the works, and Technoblade seemed to be hoarding materials in a hidden cavern that Ranboo knew *about* but not the actual location of. The night mobs didn't bother them overmuch, save when Technoblade and Philza would go out hunting for bonemeal and gunpowder. Life was peaceful.

Ranboo crushed a lemon half down against the juicer, watching the tinted liquid fill the basin underneath. He repeated the process until he had enough, then moved it into a pitcher and stirred sugar in.

Cautiously, carefully, he took a quarter-bucket of water and poured it into the pitcher, watching as the sinister liquid mixed with the sugary lemon juice that rendered it harmless. And wasn't it just so fascinating, being able to *watch* the process that turned something painful, even deadly, into something sweet and enjoyable. He stirred in a clump of fresh snow, chilling it and making up for the remainder of the water-portion that the recipe called for, and poured two glasses.

He set one down on the corner of the crafting table, where Technoblade sat hunched over a book, a blueprint, and a smattering of slime blocks. Ranboo didn't know what he was up to, and didn't really feel more than passing curiosity as he glanced over the convoluted diagrams and quickly lost any potential interest.

He sipped at the drink, tangy and maybe a bit too sweet. Certainly nothing like biting directly into a lemon, he could say that much. He set his glass down on the table and pulled out his instruction book, noting that he should use a little less than the recommended amount of sugar in the recipe, and closed it with a self-satisfied little snap.

A wail, full-Ender and *furious*, sounded from just outside the cabin.

Ranboo whirled and stared, hollow-eyed and shallow-breathed at the heavy wood of the front door. That was. That was. That was, that was, that was that was that wasthatwasthatwas—

Another sound, *hurt*, half a grunt and half a screech but all-Ender all in *pain* and Ranboo. He, he, he, he should. But.

“Ranboo, hey,” Technoblade intoned, moving from the crafting table's stool to stand beside him, hands outstretched, and Ranboo's ears flicked to him just briefly but he didn't look away from the

door, didn't do anything but take a hesitant half-step forward, then a terrified step back when the grunt-screech sounded again.

“They, they’re, they’re hurt, they’re hurt,” Ranboo breathed, begging, teeth too big for his mouth and saliva pooling too fast, dripping off his canines in spite of how hard he swallowed. His ears—tight, high, the whining, staticky pitch of an Enderman in a deathmatch, every instinct in his body screaming that he needed to apologize make himself smaller stand down back down repent apologize *run*.

Technoblade's fingers brushed against his shoulder a half-moment before the Enderman let out a dying wail, awful and loud and sudden and *final*. Ranboo jerked back, his spine slamming into one of the chests on the wall, its latch popping (or maybe it was just the wood), and his legs gave out beneath him, kicking out against the wood floor as he crammed himself into the corner.

“Ranboo,” Technoblade called, following after him, kneeling down, and maybe Ranboo should listen to him, should hear what he had to say, should take comfort in the outstretched open palms but all he could think about was the door and the Enderman and the wail and the *death* and something had hurt them something had *killed* them it could kill him too there was a dead person outside that door, probably faded into a fine mist that left only a Pearl (if it left a Pearl) and they had *died* Ranboo had *heard* them and he’d done nothing to help them, nothing to stop it, and he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe, his chest was heaving as fast as he could but he couldn’t *breathe* and Technoblade was saying something but it all sounded like faded-out nothing under the ringing in his ears as he stared at the wood stared at the door stared at what might lie behind it and

The door opened and it was Philza and Philza was rolling his shoulder with a grimace and Philza was looking at him *looking at him* and Philza was parting his lips and then Philza looked *guilty* and Ranboo knew they were killers, they'd told him as much, he'd *met* Technoblade chained in a cell and Philza covered in blood, but it was one thing to know that and another to hear Philza—an *Enderman*—

“I take it you heard that?” Philza asked quietly, softly.

Ranboo flinched, his shallow breath shuddering out of him.

Threat.

Danger.

Danger danger danger danger danger danger danger danger danger danger danger danger
danger danger danger danger danger danger *danger danger danger danger danger danger danger*
danger danger danger danger danger danger danger danger danger danger danger danger
danger danger danger danger danger danger—

“Ranboo, I need you to breathe for me kid,” Technoblade insisted. Ranboo tried. He was always trying, he tried so hard, he, he couldn’t do what Technoblade was asking though, he couldn’t, he couldn’t breathe, all he could do was sit with his tail curled close to his chest and stare at Philza Philza who he loved Philza who had just killed an Enderman Ranboo was Enderman too would Philza—

Philza took a half-step towards him and he yelped, curled in on himself, covered his head with his arms and braced, stupid dog, worthless slave, brain damaged whelp that would be better off

dragged out back and shot in the—

“Ranboo, please breathe, Phil isn’t going to hurt you,” Technoblade was saying, but Ranboo could barely hear him, much less believe him, he was scared, his lungs hurt, his chest hurt, his head hurt, there was pressure everywhere and he felt dizzy and something was going to hurt he knew it he knew it he always got hurt there was only ever one constant and it was pain.

“I, I’ll leave,” Philza stuttered, and the door opened and shut. Ranboo’s face hurt. He was gasping, unable to catch enough breath, curling tighter and tighter as he tried desperately to make himself small and beneath notice.

“Phil’s gone, okay? You’re safe, he’s not going to hurt you, he isn’t even here, c’mon Ranboo breathe for me.”

He couldn’t.

He was *trying*.

But he couldn’t.

“Okay, lemon time,” Technoblade grunted, not sounding too calm himself, as he got up, left, and Ranboo hated that, hated it, it frightened him somehow even worse, that Technoblade wasn’t there he was being left where he was terrified small abandoned curled up corner the corner he knew this the punishment room the pain the isolation the fear the breathless familiarity of what came next.

“Bite.”

He couldn’t.

“Please, Ranboo, Ranboo can you hear me at *all*?”

Not really.

His body felt numb, tingly almost, his face hurt but at a distance, like he was feeling it secondhand, and then, familiar, the darkness.

He woke up in bed with cactus paste on his face and a *headache*.

“Hey, hey,” Technoblade said, quiet, with hands on Ranboo’s hair and shoulder. Ranboo winced, allowed himself to be kept down against the pillow and mattress.

“Wh-what..?” Ranboo tried to orient himself. Why was he in bed? Why did his face hurt? (No, he knew that one, he must have been crying. Okay.) Why was Technoblade fussing over him? “What happened?”

Technoblade stilled, then sat on the edge of the mattress, palm on Ranboo’s back through the blanket. “You panicked so hard you passed out,” Technoblade informed. Hm, that did sound right. He didn’t think he’d ever done that here, but he did know that that was a thing he often did. “What do you remember?”

Ranboo frowned, tried to think (ugh, his head). “I was making lemonade,” he said. “I... finished, I think. It was too sweet.” Right, right, he’d tasted it. Okay, and after...

He looked up at Technoblade, ears pinned back shyly and an unhappy twist to his lips. He didn't know.

Technoblade ran a palm down and back up his back, and Ranboo's shoulders sunk ever so slightly out of their hunch. "Ranboo, I know you don't like eye contact, but I need you to listen close, okay?" Technoblade slipped off the bed, he was, he was *kneeling* next to it, looking at Ranboo, and Ranboo stared at the hem of the blanket anxiously. "Philza and I care about you. We are *not* going to hurt you."

"Okay?" Why, why did Technoblade need to tell him that? What had *happened*?

"Phil ran wrong of an Enderman out in front of the house." A grunt, a wooden door, a *wail*. "He attacked Phil and Phil killed him. It has *nothing* to do with you, Phil will *not* hurt you."

Ranboo's breath shuddered, in slow, out slower. He nodded. Curled up on the bed under blankets, with Technoblade's hand still on his shoulder, he gripped the blanket tight to his chest.

"He's not going to hurt me," Ranboo repeated.

Technoblade's palm lifted and caressed his hair, petting him slowly. Ranboo nodded again. He understood why that would send him into a panic. Oh! He pulled out his memory book and wrote that down. Importantly, he also added in *Philza will not hurt me*.

"Phil understands if you don't want to see him for a little while," Technoblade stated when his book was back in his inventory, and Ranboo frowned, ears pinning back.

"I, I don't, I don't, *not* want to see him," he gripped Technoblade's arm, clung to it really, "I just... got scared. I was just scared. Philza—I—I care, about you and Philza too. I don't, I don't want to hide from him."

Well.

Probably.

Ranboo swallowed hard, trying to examine his feelings, trying to... reduce them. He loved Philza. Philza wouldn't hurt him. He didn't want to hide from him, he didn't *want* to...

A warm palm on his cheekbone, making him wink. "It's okay if it's not right away," Technoblade insisted gently, "This has kind of been aaaaa maybe less than ideal situation all around." His voice was doing that upward pitch it did when he was trying to defuse the tension with humor. Ranboo offered a pathetically half-hearted attempt at a chuckle, which really ended up more like a quiet snort.

"I just..." Ranboo ran his hand up and down Technoblade's strong arm. His sleeves were rolled up; Ranboo could feel his arm hair. "They were an Enderman."

"We know."

Ranboo didn't say anything more, and neither did Technoblade. He got back up, resumed sitting on the edge of the mattress, and Ranboo just laid there and let Technoblade rub his back.

They'd been an Enderman, and he was an Enderman, but Philza wouldn't hurt him, but even so. Even so. It was... different, than knowing they'd killed some human or hybrid. With the pillagers

he'd been more worried about the stranger and the blood. Regarding their past—he'd just assumed that the people had done something wrong. But Endermen, Endermen didn't... people liked to attack Endermen for no good reason, and of course *Philza* had had a reason, of course Philza had, he'd been attacked first, it just, it just hit Ranboo *differently* when an Enderman died. Species solidarity, maybe.

What if it had been the kind Enderman, the one who'd given him the block? Endermen liked to wander, but they would stick around a certain area if they had a reason to. She'd said—she had said, that if he ever found the words to ask for help, she'd aid him.

What if it had been her?

What if she'd only been out in front of the house *because of Ranboo*?

Ranboo wouldn't blame Philza for killing someone who'd attacked him. Of course he wouldn't. But if she'd been the one there, it was because of Ranboo, which meant her death would be his fault.

“Ranboo?”

Someone who'd been kind to him, someone who'd spoken to him in the bottomless and soothing tongue of his ancestors, someone who'd gifted him soil and grass and comfort, and *he'd killed her*.

Technoblade laid down and pulled Ranboo into his arms, and Ranboo clung, silent and shaking. Not crying, not this time.

Just miserable.

Just drowningly, breathlessly miserable.

“We're sorry,” Technoblade said, cradling his skull. “We're sorry that it happened, we're sorry you had to hear it. We would have prevented it if we could have.”

Suddenly, Ranboo *needed* to know. He sat up, then climbed over Technoblade and off the bed, rushing to the ladder.

“Heh?”

“I, I just, I just, I have to, I *have* to know I—”

Ranboo slid down the ladder, heedless of what Technoblade was or wasn't doing behind him, and he turned to find Philza mid-standing up from the couch, Twitch on his shoulder and his hat off. Ranboo's sudden momentum came to a screeching halt, there at the bottom of the ladder, and he opened his mouth, then looked down and gripped at his arms.

“What, what did they look like?”

If at all possible, Philza's crumpled face looked somehow even *guiltier*.

“I... I don't know. I couldn't tell you.”

“Did, did they have, stout palms with long fingers, or a scar across the bone of their left wrist, or notches in their left index claw?”

“I don’t know,” Philza said quietly, helplessly, Technoblade’s arrival on the main floor announced only by the sound of the creaking ladder.

“I, did—” Ranboo’s words failed him, dissolving into garbled nonsense, capped off with a high and distressed vocalization. Max whined, rubbing against Ranboo’s leg.

“I’m sorry,” Philza said, words aching with feelings. Ranboo keened.

“I know. I know, I just,” Ranboo ran his hands through his hair, gripping at it and pulling as his tail twitched and thrashed in his agitation. “You won’t hurt me,” he stated, “You won’t hurt me, and they attacked you first, I, I know.” He hugged himself in a futile effort to self-soothe, much of him wanting to close the distance between him and Philza and kneel so he could be easily held by the shorter man, some of him wanting to lean back against Technoblade and hide himself in the cape he just knew he’d be offered if he did.

Philza took a slow, cautious step forward, hands half-outstretched. “I’m not going to hurt you. I didn’t want to fight ‘im.”

Ranboo closed the distance between him and Philza, taking his hands in his own and clinging to them, shoulders hunched, eyes staring at nothing but the hands and the floor below them.

Philza’s thumbs caressed Ranboo’s hands softly, slowly.

Ranboo tried to just... breathe.

“Can I have a hug?”

“Of course,” Philza breathed in a rush, releasing Ranboo’s hands and lifting his arms, accepting the mess of a boy that fell into them. Ranboo knelt and clung to Philza, shaking just a little and breathing in a scent now as familiar as his own. Technoblade’s hand settled in Ranboo’s hair, petting slow and gentle, another familiar reassurance.

“I really didn’t want to,” Philza insisted quietly, “Ever since you moved in I’ve been tryin’ real hard to keep out of fights with Endermen; we both have. Been careful about eye contact and all that, but—they’ve just got some sort of bloody grudge against me! I wasn’t even *facing* this one when he attacked me.”

Ranboo. Recognized, that tone. He. He’d used it himself, when he was explaining himself, desperate to be believed. Desperate for whoever was listening to *understand*.

It was strange, hearing it come out of Philza’s mouth.

“It’s your wings,” Ranboo said, quiet as well. He felt both Philza and Technoblade freeze.

“My—wings?” Philza asked, perplexed, flexing the limbs. Ranboo kept his eyes closed and his face buried in Philza’s haori.

“Mm. If you’re not used to them, the eyespots can be just as agitating as actual eyes,” he explained, opening his eyes again when he felt Philza pull the wings back in. “Even, even if you *are* used to them, looking at them still isn’t... fun. The Enderman must have looked at your wings and seen your eyespots. I’m not, I’m not Enderman-enough to have a true berserk but, but I think seeing your spots would’ve p-probably been enough, for a full-Enderman to have one.”

“True berserk?”

“Eye contact, for Endermen, is a call to a deathmatch. It, it, in our—in *their* brains, the only responses are to, to, to,” Ranboo whined, fumbling for the word. “**Cower-apologize**, it, you, you make yourself small so the other person knows you surrender. Or it, it triggers a berserk, and you fight until you’re dead. It, your, your wings, they...”

Technoblade stepped away, another step, and leaned heavily against the wall, thunking his head back against the wood.

“It seems so *obvious* in hindsight,” he groaned, then swore under his breath. “Every time we’d get randomly jumped by an angry Enderman, you and your ‘bad luck’ with ‘em.”

“Ranboo, all this time?” Philza asked, pulling away a little to cup Ranboo’s face. “Have my wings been—hurting you?”

“Not, *hurting*,” Ranboo denied, face twisting uncomfortably, looking off to the side, “It’s just, if I slip up and look at your eyespots it’s... uncomfortable.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

Ranboo flinched, even though Philza’s tone was anything but accusatory.

“It, I, it wasn’t, I can’t, they’re your *wings*! It’s not like I could just ask you not to have them.”

Philza opened his mouth, but didn’t seem to have a response for that. He just frowned somehow deeper, and then pulled Ranboo back in against his chest, mouth pressed to the top of Ranboo’s hair and wire-tight arms circling him. Ranboo clung in return, feeling... icky, for even bringing it up. They were his *wings*. Now he’d feel all guilty for having his own limbs he was born with, just because Ranboo’s brain was a never ending mess of fucking problems.

Technoblade was pacing, the quiet clop of his hooves against wood when he normally moved with silent steps more than enough evidence of his own agitation. Ranboo squeezed his eyes shut. Bother, burden, mess of an ex-slave, too brain-broken to do anything but cause problems and make kind people feel guilty for *his* neuroses.

“...Wing cozies,” Technoblade stated, coming to a halt.

“What?” Ranboo asked.

“What?” Philza asked.

“You mentioned how the weather was a little hard on your wings anyway, right? We’ve got wool. We can make coverings for your wings for when you’re not flying. It’ll keep Ranboo and Endermen from getting worked up over them and you from getting too cold. Day late and an emerald short but,” Technoblade shrugged.

“Better late than never,” Philza finished tiredly.

Even so, Philza made no move until Ranboo did, pulling away slowly with his ears twisted down. Philza caressed Ranboo’s cheeks, then helped him up off his knees, Ranboo half-stooped over the shorter man. Philza released him hesitantly, and Ranboo hovered until Technoblade clapped him on the shoulder, then slid down the ladder to pull wool from the basement chests.

And so Ranboo found himself seated cross-legged on the floor in a small circle around a crafting table with Philza and Technoblade. All three of them were... more intensely focused on the work than wool and yarn demanded. Just that, well, none of them were overly keen on. Eheheh. Well.

Let it never be said that anyone in the cabin was the most competent person when it came to dealing with conflict.

The awkward tension was thick enough to slice.

“I’m sorry,” Ranboo finally broke, dropping the wool into his lap and covering his face, ears down flat.

“Ranboo, hey, no, you haven’t a thing to be sorry for,” Philza followed immediately, his own work abandoned at his thigh.

“I just. We’re making *wing coverings* because I’m uncomfortable with how you look, and things are awkward because I can’t handle you killing somebody even though I *knew that* since I met you and I just. Feel like a bother.”

“Ranboo, you’re not a bother,” Philza assured. Ranboo dug his teeth into his lip and turned his head. Philza *said* that but Ranboo couldn’t help but feel—

“Okay but also: so what if you were?”

“Techno!”

“No, listen to me. *Listen* to me. So *what?* What if you were a bother, Ranboo, what do you think will happen if you are?” Technoblade leaned forward, his open palm gesturing broadly at Ranboo.

“I—you’ll, be annoyed.”

“And what happens if we’re annoyed?”

“I, you—you’ll be angry with me.”

“Okay, but what *happens?*”

“Techno, you’re—”

“No. I want to hear this.”

Ranboo was shaking.

“I don’t *know!*” Ranboo buried his face in his hands, shrinking under Technoblade’s attention. They’d hurt him? He knew they wouldn’t. They’d berate him? They hadn’t yet. They’d abandon him? They’d only do that if he didn’t act “free,” and he had been, he *had*. They wouldn’t hate him, they wouldn’t hit him, they’d just be annoyed and mad and, “I don’t know, I just, I just—”

“Ranboo, I get it,” Technoblade said, a familiar gentleness once again inside his tone, as he took one of Ranboo’s wrists and pulled it slowly from his face. “You don’t want to upset the people around you. I *get* that. But nothing bad is going to happen to you.”

“I don’t *want* to burden you...” Ranboo whined insistently, and Technoblade sighed out a small chuckle.

“And I understand that, but listen to me, listen.” He ran his hand up under his mask. “Listen. *Everyone’s* a bother. Life is just a series of inconveniencing the people around you in minor to mediocre ways, sometimes even major ways. You bother us, we bother you, we bother each other, it’s just something you’re going to have to make your peace with.”

Ranboo pressed his lips thin.

“You don’t bother me,” he said, sounding an awful lot like he was pouting, but maybe that was his right, too.

Technoblade snorted. “We are literally making wing cozies for Phil *because* his eyespots bother you.”

“Not, not—not that kind of bother, not—”

“I asked you to watch after Carl while I was gone.”

“I, that wasn’t—” Ranboo cut himself off, but Technoblade just waited. “That wasn’t a bother, I was happy to.”

“I asked you to do something for no gain to yourself. It was a minor inconvenience to you, even if you *were* happy to.”

“I, I guess...”

“We have you cook all the time.”

“I *live* here!”

“And the consequences of living here are that sometimes you have to do things for others. Like how sometimes we do things for you.”

“I, it’s, not the same,” Ranboo insisted weakly.

“What makes it different?”

Ranboo trembled silently a long moment, his careening thoughts refusing to give him a single coherent sentence to work with, and then he whined, pitching forward only to be scooped up by Technoblade’s strong arms and pulled in against his chest. Ranboo burrowed against him, eyes screwed shut and tail curling around behind Technoblade. He let out a shaking breath as Technoblade’s arms encircled him, keeping him steady, anchored, safe.

“We watch out for each other,” Technoblade said, petting down Ranboo’s hair and spine. “We help each other out when we need it, and trust the ones we help will do the same for us.”

Philza’s hand joined Technoblade’s on Ranboo’s back, a smaller, cooler point of comfort and familiarity. “And *you’re* not the one who fucked up today. That’s on me. There’s absolutely no reason for you to feel sorry when I’m the one at some serious fuckin’ fault here.”

Ranboo shrugged weakly. “I knew. I knew you were both—killers. I just... it hadn’t, hadn’t happened, around me, before.”

“And I’m sorry.” Philza sounded it, too. No one had ever apologized to Ranboo as sincerely or as deeply as Philza was apologizing now. “And I pray to Prime the one I killed wasn’t your friend.”

“I, I, it would’ve been my own fault—”

“Shhh, shshshsh,” Philza cut him off, “No it wouldn’t have.”

“I, I,” Ranboo swiped at his eyes, not wanting to cry again, not having it *in him* to cry again. “I’m the reason, I, the—promised, that if I needed help, to give it to me—so—if—”

Technoblade’s arms squeezed tighter and Ranboo pressed his face to Technoblade’s chest, taut as a strung bow and shaking like a hare.

“It’s a messy set of circumstances,” Technoblade stated firmly. “Phil’s not at fault for gettin’ attacked or for defending himself, you’re not at fault for anything that’s happened today; this isn’t a situation where there’s anyone to blame. It’s just bad and it sucks and it’s awful.”

Philza sighed. “And we have to live with that.”

Ranboo nodded. Then nodded again, brushing his face against the cloth of Technoblade’s chiton, ears catching against the lower tufts of his furred neckline. He opened his mouth to apologize again, then shut it. He shouldn’t bother them with apologies, and he... he didn’t need to apologize. He hadn’t done anything wrong (*but if it was her if she was the one who died—*). He just.

It just sucked.

Philza’s wings stretched out around them, his hand rubbing gently at Ranboo’s spine. “Is this alright?”

“Mm,” Ranboo hummed. “When, when you hold me or when we go to sleep, I can’t, I can’t see them? Or I can only see a small piece, and that doesn’t...” Ranboo gestured vaguely, for all that nobody could actually see it. “It’s not the same, in, in whatever part of my brain is in charge of this.”

“Good to know, good to know,” Philza intoned, and Ranboo... settled. Not quickly, no, and in the back of his mind he knew that they were supposed to be making wing cozies, that he’d get plenty of chance to be held by them that night, but he was free, and he was acting like it, and he’d panicked so hard he passed out earlier, so he let himself be held. He let himself be soothed and comforted by their touch. He let the tension drain out of his neck at the base of his skull, let his spine relax and sink all his weight limply against Technoblade, unclenched his jaw and released the tension at his temples.

Exhaustion hit him unexpectedly, and he made himself sit up. He’d already had an impromptu nap; if he let himself doze here he’d never get to sleep that night. He smiled at Technoblade, then at Philza, maybe not happy but not all that distressed.

“I, I think, I’m okay now, thank you, thank you both.”

They detangled from one another slowly, Philza's attention lingering on Ranboo and Ranboo shuffling self-consciously back to his spot, picking up his forgotten yarn.

Rather than returning to his own work, Technoblade held open his arms once more, but this time not to Ranboo. Philza smiled wryly. "Techno, I'm f—"

"Phil."

Philza cut off with a small, barely-there note of surprise, perhaps at being spoken to with such a firm tone from his best friend. But then he blew out air through his nose, and scooted his way in, sinking into Technoblade's embrace and encircling his neck.

Ranboo practically felt like he was watching something he shouldn't as the two pressed their foreheads up against one another, nose to nose, Technoblade's mask bumped askew atop Philza's hat. Technoblade cupped Philza's head right at the base of his skull and Philza's hand rested just beneath Technoblade's crown.

"Nobody's to blame," Technoblade said quietly. "It wasn't your fault."

"Since when are you the bastion of emotional maturity around here?" Philza griped, just as soft.

"Yeah, who *did* pass me this baton? I'd like to hand it off now."

"Not it," Philza snorted with a tiny giggle.

"Well jeez, it's not gonna be Ranboo."

They chuckled.

"Guess you're stuck with it then."

Technoblade hummed.

Ranboo watched and, hesitantly, set his wool back down. He shuffled back over, and carefully draped himself against Philza's back. The wings would've made it awkward and difficult for most people, but Ranboo was very long and his arms were quite noodly, so he managed to hug Philza from behind without too much trouble.

"Hey you," Philza said warmly, strain audible in his tone and his hand covering overtop Ranboo's.

"I'm, I'm not," Ranboo tried to make himself speak, remembering the note he'd made, about treating Philza and Technoblade with the same compassion they'd shown him. "I'm not, I don't hate you. I'm not mad at you. It wasn't your fault; you just defended yourself."

"Mate," Philza crooned, giving Ranboo's hand a squeeze and sinking his weight down against Technoblade's chest, much like Ranboo had earlier, his face to Technoblade's shoulder and their arms around each other.

Ranboo closed his eyes and curled his tail in close, clinging to Philza as his treacherous mind once again whispered, *But what if it was her?*

Chapter End Notes

And the doll you've all been waiting for, the [Enderboi himself!](#)

Comments/concrit always appreciated <3 <3

A note! From now on, I will be moving to a Sunday upload schedule.

I will be out of town this coming Sunday so honestly WHO KNOWS when next week's upload is gonna be, it might actually end up being Monday evening for all I can predict, HOWEVER! I will be attempting to upload on Sunday, and will be uploading on Sundays every week after that. It is my hope that by putting this in the end notes people will actually see it.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This chapter was SO fun to write. Worldbuilding is a Huge Fave of mine

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Philza's wing cozies made an immediate difference. They were a deep, soft turquoise, almost black, and Ranboo found it easier to look his way the *moment* he put them on. They were easily removed, in case Philza should need to take into flight on a moment's notice, trick clasps along the ridges that he could readily pull off. They were a little harder to actually get on, and although Philza *could* manage it himself (he'd tested it), it was now part of Technoblade's morning routine to help Philza into them, careful not to skew the feathers.

Even so, a death was not so easily forgotten, and seeing Philza still left... Well. One step forward one step back, he guessed, a net 0 all around. He could look at Philza directly now, but an awkward, awful air still *lingered*.

Ranboo didn't want it to. Obviously he didn't want it to! Just, that, even though they'd talked about it, even though Ranboo didn't blame him, even though Philza tried to brush it off and return to smiling and giggling like normal, it...

Ranboo supposed it couldn't be helped. One of those things that would fade with time. He just wished it'd fade a little *faster*. He didn't want to look at one of the kindest men he'd ever met and feel a pulse of fear, feel an unbidden memory of a wail and a death rise to consciousness.

He knew Philza wouldn't hurt him. *Even if he could*. It wasn't Philza's fault. *What if it had been her?* He had no way of knowing who the Enderman was, so he shouldn't twist himself up in knots about it. *It would've been my fault*. It was no one's fault, no one's, *no one's except mine*.

Okay so maybe his brain hadn't been the greatest and most fun of places lately. It'd fade with time. He just needed to not think about it. He needed to think about literally anything else. Like mining!

He did... a lot of mining.

Like.

Like a *lot* of mining.

Sometimes he'd find himself standing in the mineshaft, staring vacantly at the wall, unaware of how long he'd been still and thoughtless and hovering in the mire of "*Somebody's dead and it might be someone I care about*." Sometimes he'd find himself on his knees, hands over his mouth, paralyzed by "*If I had brought up the wingspots sooner, no one would've had to die at all*." Sometimes he would stand, tail curled to his chest, with his hands squeezed against his eyes fighting off, "*It's my fault it's my fault it's my fault*." He would shake himself, grip his pickaxe, and resume mining, trying to block out his empty thoughts and the pervasive feeling that he never

learned how to grieve properly. He would return to the cabin late, sometimes past the sun setting, as he did that night, tired and kind of sore and deliberately not thinking about it.

He sighed as he sat down on the couch, stretching his arms out in front of him and tail flopping on the cushions. His body ached, not in a bad way, but just from exertion he hadn't really... had to engage in, here. He rubbed at his neck, a little stiff from hunching in the mineshaft (in his defense, he did *try* to mine it tall enough), but glanced up as Philza approached him.

He smiled and took the mug of tea Philza extended, cradling the warm clay in both hands and blowing lightly at the steam. Philza didn't linger or chat, just crossed a few more steps to lean against the windowsill and lifted his own mug to his lips.

Maybe Ranboo would make it a point to come home before sundown tomorrow, so he could have some quality time with Enderchest and the kittens. They were getting ever larger, growing and tumbling and playing and clamoring all over the place. With Max as their friend and pal, the cats now had access to the bedroom and the main floor, a little series of shelves near the trap door letting them climb up or hop down as they wished. Ranboo scritchd at Jjjjjjeffery as he twined around his ankles, meowing with his eternally impressive volume, and sipped his tea as the kitten rolled over and Ranboo bapped him with his tail.

"Uh, Ranboo," Philza said slowly from his spot at the window, voice pitched high and brow furrowed in concern. "What did you say your Enderman friend looked like?"

Ranboo couldn't say what he did with his mug (it didn't break or spill (he was pretty sure)), only that in an instant, he was at the window, peering through the frosted glass. Inside the fenceline, but only just, an Enderman stood, staring intently at the cabin, grass block in hand. From that distance, it could've been anyone, really, but Ranboo could only think of one single soul who would have reason to gaze so unwaveringly at the place where he lived.

He barely remembered to grab his coat as he rushed out the door, eyes on their hands, on, oh, *oh!*

"Thank goodness!" Ranboo gasped, **"Ma'am, you are alright (relief-inquisition)!"**

"I am," she confirmed, nodding and extending the grass block so it was held between them, their eyes on each other's hands, **"Why is this noteworthy?"**

"The—Philza, one of the non-Endermen I live with, killed an Enderman near our," Ranboo struggled briefly for the word, **"residence. I was anxious-frightened and worried you had been that Enderman."**

"I was not. I am alive and healthy. Are you threatened that your dangerous non-Enderman will hurt you?"

"No. They will not hurt me. Philza was attacked first; he defend-retaliated."

She nodded, **"It is good to know that."** She lifted one hand and touched his wrist, which also meant touching his forearm because her fingers were very long. **"You are still agitated."**

"Yes ma'am. The death of another Enderman agitates me."

"Even though you know you will not be harmed?"

“Yes ma’am.”

She crooned at him, sweet and gentle that made something in his lungs go wonky. **“Little one, did your parent-caretaker ever teach you of death?”**

Ranboo frowned, digging his claws into the dirt and feeling frozen, hair-fine roots snap beneath his fingers. **“I know of death.”**

“Of an (intensifier)-Enderman’s death?”

Ranboo frowned deeper, and shook his head hesitantly. **“I do not remember my parent-caretakers. I do not remember learning of Endermen’s deaths.”**

She turned her gaze skyward, and then looked to the cabin. **“It is too bright here. Follow.”**

She left the block in his hands. He followed.

She walked with the long legs and slow gait of a full Enderman, one that was both easy yet tricky to keep pace with. They were well past the lantern lights, and Ranboo could see spiders and skeletons, but interestingly, they gave the pair space. Ranboo glanced at his companion, and wondered how she managed to keep them so far at bay; if it was a full-Enderman thing, or even the night mobs not wanting to take on two Endermen at once. Er, one and a half.

She took him to an open, snowy field, starlight and the gibbous moon making the place glint beautifully and Ranboo’s fogging breath dance before his lips. Seemingly satisfied, she first crouched, and pulled another block from the earth, snow falling off as she pulled the brittle grass and dirt into her palms. Then she laid back, her tail swished to the side, her legs stretched out.

“Join me, little one.”

Ranboo laid down in the snow.

The stars were, if possible, even more beautiful from this angle. The void behind them nearly sang with its elegant grace. He clutched the dirt block to his belly, just below his ribcage, and his tail tip twitched off to the side of him.

“Your soul is behind your breath,” she began without preamble, and Ranboo—though he could not tell where from—recognized the phrase.

“Your soul is behind your breath,” he repeated back to her, the lilt and cadence of the words settling into a happy-fuzzy little part of his brain. Like poetry, almost, but closer to the surface. (Not that... not that Ranboo was very familiar with poetry, as far as he remembered).

“And we are born of Dragon’s breath. Our birthplace is The End, a perfect-void, and underneath the void, Endstone’s sand. The Dragon spits fire. The fire is magic. The magic encases a single grain, and shells around it as a Pearl. The Pearl is our soul.”

Ranboo was rapt, listening with cocked ears and eyes glued, unblinking, to the night sky.

“Our souls start small. We must live to add a layer. Many lack the strength to leave (teleport) The End in their first life. Some remain in The End to nurture-caretake or parent-caretake new souls there. Others come (teleport) to this place (neutral) or the Nether (derogatory). We live. We learn. We die.

“Our souls return to The End.

“We cast new bodies around us. We live, and add a layer to our Pearls. Our souls grow larger with every reincarnation, and we always return to The End when we die. We do not remember our lost lives. But we learn from them even so. We live. We learn. We caretake those whose bodies or Pearls are younger than ours. We die. We return to The End.

“We cannot return to The End until our Pearl is thrown.” Ranboo glanced at her briefly, tail perking up and brow furrowing only slightly. **“Pearls that are too small-young break when the body does, but older Pearls can linger in this place (neutral) until the non-Enderman that killed them throws it. They return to The End. They live. They learn. They add another layer. They die.**

“Nobody wants to die.” Here, her tone deviated into something almost-sorrowful. **“But everyone must. All lives are fleeting. All lives must be cherished. Even non-Endermen. Even the Dragon.**

“The Dragon rules The End as a tyrant, but we are born from its flame. It is only coaxed to spit when defending its egg from the intruder non-Endermen of this realm (neutral). The egg cannot hatch without its parent-dragon’s death, for the Dragon’s life energy to be transferred into it. The non-Endermen from this place (neutral) cannot reach The End without the Pearls of the enlightened (holy).

“We are not separate,” she said, **“from any other living thing. Everything you touch, or see, you are connected to. Even the dirt. Even the void. Even The End.”**

“Even the dirt. Even the void. Even The End,” Ranboo repeated, this phrase also striking something almost *familiar* in the back of his brain. Something he must have heard before, a saying well-known and well-shared.

For a long moment, Ranboo stared at the sky and tried to process all he’d just learned.

“Ma’am?”

She let out a small vocalization, all-Ender, and he mimicked it reflexively. Somehow he knew it was a prompting for him to continue.

“I have heard that sometimes, when an Enderman is killed, they will leave more than one Pearl behind. How?”

She vwooped happily, her tail swaying up, then slowly drifting back down. Ranboo’s tail mirrored hers, though less elegantly.

“Outside of The End, we wander. Sometimes, we wander with someone at our side. If the love (platonic, romantic, affectionate, familial, any, all) is profound, when one soul returns to The End, they will wait (held in stasis) before forming their new body. They will wait (deliberate action) for their cherished one to join them. The Pearls form a body together, solitary again, but never alone.”

She turned and looked at him, but returned her gaze to the stars before she resumed speaking. **“I do not know what non-Enderman you are. Whatever it is: you must have loved them dearly in your last life.”**

Ranboo laughed nervously, tail twitching. **“I struggle to imagine having lived before. Or died.”**

She placed her hand atop his grass block, humming low and bottomless.

“Your Pearl is small-young. I know this. You emanate a specific type of youth.”

Ranboo chuckled.

“Your Pearl is large-old. I believe this. You emanate a specific type of wisdom.”

She vwooped happily, her laughter buzzing and lilting, and they resumed staring at the space between the stars.

“How do Endermen mourn?” Ranboo asked, quiet, small.

“Grief is metaphorical-heavy. We gather. We speak of our memories of the deceased. We gather. We listen to those who have memories, when we ourselves do not. To speak of the dead is good. To listen to stories of the dead is good. We will forget them, eventually, but we speak and listen while we still remember. And then, when the stories have been shared and it is time to wander again, someone throws their Pearl, if it did not disperse when their body did.”

“Throwing the Pearl is, good?”

“It is (intensifier)-necessary. The soul cannot return to The End until the Pearl has been thrown.”

Her tone turned briefly sharp.

“There are cruel non-Endermen who hoard Pearls. Who do not use them, but keep them, store them; if we are (intensifier)-lucky, they will trade the Pearls for jewels or food. Sometimes Endermen who have wandered together will trade what we find for hoarded Pearls, but it is unwise to go near non-Endermen’s villages.”

She placed her hand on Ranboo’s hair, then returned it to her own block.

“You are young; you should not go near these hoarding non-Endermen at all, if you are able. They are dangerous, and gain their stolen Pearls through many deaths.”

Ranboo hummed, pulled out his notebook, and then remembered that he probably hadn’t explained this to her.

“My memory is (intensifier)-terrible. I have to write down what I know if I want to remember it. May I have a quiet stretch of time to write what you have told me?”

“You may.”

Ranboo trilled his thanks and set to writing, book balanced against the frozen dirt on his abdomen, star and moonlight not a *ton* to see by, but he got it all down well enough. When he finished, he read over what he’d written and felt... satisfied, in a weird and bone-deep kind of way. He closed his book, pressed it briefly against his forehead, then placed it in his inventory.

“Will I see you again?”

“No one can ever truly know. I want to see you again. I will return, if I am able to.”

“Thank you ma’am. I want to see you again as well.”

“You are less agitated.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“This pleases me. You are physically well?”

“I am cold.”

“I will return you to your dangerous non-Endermen.”

She rose, and Ranboo got to his feet much less gracefully to follow. Oh. Oh he was *cold*-cold, okay, he shivered and clutched the block closer to his belly, then trotted after her, heels kicking up little clumps of snow. A zombie approached, and she deathcalled at it, a high, staticky whine that grew and grew and crescendoed.

She teleported. The zombie quit approaching. Mostly because it was dead. No other zombies followed in its path, seeming content to mind their own businesses elsewhere. Ranboo gripped at his tail, trying to smooth down the raised fluff, knowing she hadn’t made the noise at *him*, that she’d actually protected him, but still. A deathcall was never *just* a warning. She pat his head, and he glanced up at her shoulder briefly. He rounded an arm around the grass block so he didn’t drop it, then lifted his other hand to pat on top of hers, and he trilled a small thanks.

The rest of their trek back went undisturbed.

Philza and Technoblade stepped out onto the little... “porch” area at the top of the stairs when Ranboo and the kind Enderman crossed back inside the fenceline. She came to a stop a few feet away, within speaking distance but not so close that they might strike her with anything more than an arrow.

“Hey,” Philza called softly, sounding hopefully relieved, “This is your buddy?”

“Mm!” Ranboo confirmed with a perked tail and a happy nod.

“That’s great,” Philza said with a rush of air, shoulders and wings both sinking.

“Introduce us?” Technoblade asked, and Ranboo bit his lip with a little nod, turning to look up at her shoulder.

“This is Technoblade and Philza, they’re glad to meet you. Oh, also, I’m Ranboo.”

“I am satisfied to meet them. I am pleased to know your name. I am Eidvryt.”

“This is **Eidvryt**,” Ranboo translated, turning back to Technoblade and Philza, who were *very pointedly* not looking directly at the pair on the ground. Philza’s brow furrowed, his lips parting.

“Aid—Aid-vort, no, Ed, no, no, Aid-vee-ort. Aidvee-ort. Aaaa, pbbbt.”

“Would he take Edward?” Technoblade asked as Philza continued to try and pronounce something his non-Enderman tongue was probably not suited for. Ranboo looked back at Eidvryt.

“He wants to know if you are alright with him calling you Edward?”

“I do not care what non-Enderman call me.”

“That’s fine!”

“Aidveyort!”

“That’s... kinda close!” Ranboo encouraged, ears twisted at half-mast with embarrassment for his... friend..?

It seemed strange to think of him as anything else, by this point. Yet Ranboo was still hesitant to call him that, even in his own mind.

“It’s nice to meet him. We’re glad you have an Enderman friend,” Technoblade continued on.

“They’re glad I know you. They are glad I have an Enderman... friend?”

She pat his head again, ruffling his hair slightly, and his tail waved as he let out a happy little vwoop.

“I am content to be known as your friend. It is good for you to know Endermen.”

“Eidvyrt agrees with you about the ‘me having Endermen friends’ thing,” Ranboo relayed.

“Aidveert,” Philza tried, fist lifted to his chin.

“You’re getting closer,” Ranboo said, stiffly raising a thumbs up in his direction.

“He can come inside if he wants to room here a little while,” Technoblade offered, “Phil and I will do whatever we need to to avoid eye-contact and Phil’s got his wing cozies on.”

“Oh!” Ranboo breathed softly. **“Technoblade says you are welcome inside, and he and Philza will hide their eyes from you. It is an offer based on your desires.”**

“I do not desire entry. Only to know that you are well, and speak with you when I pass through this area. I am pleased by his offer. I respectfully decline.”

“Thanks but no thanks! **Eidvyrt** just wanted to catch up with me and make sure I was alright.”

Technoblade nodded. “The offer stands if he ever changes his mind. Other than that, we hope he has a good evening.”

“They hope... they,” Ranboo fumbled for the phrasing. There wasn’t... there wasn’t a direct translation for what Technoblade was saying. **“They wish you safety and a pleasant future. If you change your mind, their offer will not be rescinded.”**

She vwooped, and bowed shallowly at Technoblade and Philza. **“They are kind, even though they are dangerous, and non-Endermen. I understand more clearly why you reside with them. I wish for their safety and yours, as well.”**

“Good evening to you too, and you’re kind people, even though you’re dangerous,” Ranboo relayed, as the three of them watched her resume her wandering, Ranboo looking at her back

directly and Philza and Technoblade watching her from their peripherals.

“Edveort,” Philza tried as Ranboo climbed up the stairs, shivering again as he felt a rush of warm air when Technoblade opened the door.

“That, uh, was actually worse.”

“Should the dirt block maybe stay outside?” Technoblade prompted gently, and Ranboo jumped, squeezing it reflexively closer to his abdomen.

“Oh, uh, sorry, I forgot,” he fumbled, sending the block into his inventory, right next to the first one Eidvyr had given him. He swayed a little under the unexpected weight of Technoblade’s cloak landing on his shoulders, and chirped questioningly as he reached up and drew it in closer, nosing into the fluff.

Technoblade did not explain himself, simply strode across the room to add another log to the fire.

“Techno and I ate while you were out,” Philza said, nudging Ranboo towards the table. He uncovered a plate they’d left on the turned-off stove burner, and brought it over to Ranboo. The food was still warm, though a little chewy, and Ranboo savored the way it helped his insides warm up.

Of all the Enderman traits he’d inherited, resistance to temperatures—whether low or high—was not one of them.

“I’m real glad your friend is alright, mate,” Philza said, setting a steaming mug of tea in front of Ranboo and sipping at his own as he sat next to him.

“I am too,” Ranboo agreed, taking note that the awful tension that had haunted him seemed... if not entirely lifted, at least mostly. He switched which hand was holding his spoon and reached over to cover Philza’s hand with his own. Philza stilled, then released his mug and twisted his hand to hold Ranboo’s.

Ranboo ate quietly, and Philza occasionally sipped his tea.

When he was finished, he asked, “The person you did kill, did they drop a Pearl?”

“Yeah, mate, do you want it?”

Ranboo nodded slowly. “I’d like to be the one to throw it, if that’s alright?”

“Of course,” Philza said. “It’s downstairs, here.” He stood and went to the ladder, and Ranboo took his dishes to the sink, where Technoblade took them and washed them.

“So to clarify: throwing Pearls is *not* disrespectful to Endermen?” Technoblade asked as he worked, Ranboo keeping a healthy distance away from the running water.

“It isn’t. It’s a good thing,” Ranboo explained, feeling a small thrill at being the one to explain something to *Technoblade*. And Philza, who returned with the Pearl and set it in Ranboo’s hands. His shiver had nothing to do with feeling cold. “What’s bad is when people keep Pearls around but never throw them. The Pearl, the, it needs to land somewhere in order to teleport back to The End. If it isn’t thrown, the soul can’t reincarnate.”

“Okay so we *should* be throwing Pearls? Alright, that’s pog,” Technoblade expressed, turning off the sink and drying his hands.

“That is good information to have,” Philza agreed.

“Um, I’m gonna go throw this. Do you want your cape back?”

“Nah, it’s about time to turn in for the day. You go do your thing.”

Ranboo nodded, and slipped back outside. When the door was closed, he took a moment to just. Hold the Pearl.

It was maybe the size of a large apple, perfectly round, with an iridescent quality that Ranboo found quite pleasant. It was neither cool nor warm; it simply was. And when he stared at it, it seemed... almost to... *pulse*? Not like it was glowing, there wasn’t any *light*, but, but, the colors, something. It. It.

It was alive. Ranboo could say that much. And wasn’t it strange to think, that he was holding someone’s *soul* between his palms? Wasn’t that just curious? He pressed it close against his diaphragm, and trotted down the steps, tail swaying behind him. At the base, he turned, and looked at the lantern that hung over the door, then down at the Pearl in his hands.

“I didn’t know you,” Ranboo said quietly. “I have no memories of you to share, except the one, but that’s not a very happy memory at all. And there’s no one here to listen, even if I did want to tell that story. So. This probably isn’t a very proper funeral. Er. Grieving? I’m not, probably, grieving like an Enderman really should. But.” Ranboo huffed at his own inexperienced fumbling, then chuckled wryly at himself.

He lifted the Pearl to his lips. **“I’m sorry you died. May your next life be a good one.”**

He tossed the Pearl up onto the little “porch” area, and when it landed he—

He blinked, rapid and almost-overwhelmed, lifting his hands to his diaphragm.

Oh.

Oh, oh he, he hadn't expected. He hadn't known what to expect, actually, but.

The sensation was impossible to describe. Teleportation, it, it was like, like, like *nothing*. It was like not a single thing that he had ever experienced before. When the Pearl struck the wood, just briefly, Ranboo had touched The End.

Then the Pearl had passed into it, and Ranboo had taken the Pearl's place here in the world, but for just that one moment, that single moment, Ranboo had touched another soul and that soul had touched The End and at The End there was the void and it had been so brief, so momentary, so utterly fleeting, yet it felt like something in Ranboo's lungs had been unlocked.

Something buzzed behind his diaphragm, energized by the warp.

"Oh I'm supposed to fall *asleep* now! Oh boy!" Ranboo said to himself, his tail fluffed up and his ears perked upright and his whole torso alight with something new and strange and *Ender*. He paced in a tight little circle at the top of the stairs, tail wiggling and twitching, and he almost considered going and letting Ranmoo and Bob back out into their paddock just so he could flit about between them.

But no, he'd put them away for the night, it was *late*, the moon was high in the sky and it was far too late for Ranboo to be this keyed up.

Fortunately enough, he'd spent a lot of the day mining and he'd had tea with his (also late) dinner, so once the rush of teleportation wore off Ranboo felt that energy crash hard. He hung up Technoblade's cape and his coat, dressed for bed, then hesitated.

Technoblade and Philza were already under the blankets, laying together like they had back when Philza had first arrived, before Ranboo had been brave enough to ask to join them. Philza didn't sleep with the wing cozies on, either, so his eyespot was visible in the low light of the grate and what moonlight made it in through the window. Not enough to make Ranboo really uncomfortable, but still. Visible.

But then Philza's wing was being lifted and Technoblade was scooting over to make room, and Ranboo felt a little tug at his heart as he crawled into bed and settled into his familiar place between them.

"How'd throwing the Pearl go?" Philza asked, quiet and thick with sleepiness.

"Good," Ranboo said, not wanting to try and describe the *everything* it had been. "Their soul passed back to The End. I couldn't think of much to say to them before they went, though."

Technoblade's fingers twined in Ranboo's hair and he twirled his tail around Philza's leg, whose wing settled over the three of them. Ranboo pressed his face into familiar warmth and breathed deeply, one hand draped over Technoblade's waist, the other pressed in against his own midsection.

Every bookmark, kudos, and comment is appreciated, and much love to everyone who has <3

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

So, mornings had been fairly predictable, living together with Philza and Technoblade. After they'd gone to the city and Technoblade had bought a blessed bell, the routine had changed slightly, but only just. A single added step. Now, when Philza and Ranboo were still getting dressed and Technoblade had already finished because he always got up first and fastest, he would ring the blessed bell, clap his hands, and pray. He did this at regular intervals throughout the day as well, and Ranboo couldn't really tell if he was trying to make up for the months of lost time, or if he regularly prayed that often.

However, *that* morning, three days after Eidvyr's visit, when Ranboo tried to follow Technoblade out of bed, Philza's arms only wrapped tighter around Ranboo's midsection. He made a confused noise, but allowed himself to be kept, flopping bonelessly back down onto the mattress.

"S fucking cold out today," Philza grumbled, pressing his face against Ranboo's back and wing tightening around them. Technoblade frowned, ears flicking towards his friend, then swiveling back and down. He crossed to the grate, tossing another log into the fire, and Philza snorted.

"Outside, mate."

"Okay," Technoblade said, staring from where he crouched on his haunches.

Ranboo twisted around and looped his arms around Philza, patting his hair with confused, but mild, concern.

"Why does it being cold outside make you—" Technoblade gestured vaguely at Philza rather than finishing his sentence.

Philza sighed. "My fuckin' trick knee is actin' up again," he grouched. "And I slept poorly last night to boot."

"You have a trick knee?" Ranboo asked.

"Yeah. Too many hard landings when I was young and thought I was invincible. Weather can cause a flareup."

"Alright, two things," Technoblade said as he stood, then continued to get dressed and ready for the day. "One, do you still have your old cane?"

"Nah, got stolen or maybe broken during the raid."

"Need me to carve you something quick for today while we work on getting you a permanent replacement?"

Philza sighed, burrowing in further against the mattress. "Yeah, actually, that'd be nice."

"Kay," Technoblade said nonchalantly, settling his crown atop his head and approaching the blessed bell. "Second thing:"

Techno gripped the bell's cord. "WAKE UP OLD MAAAAAAN!"

Ranboo jolted at the sudden screaming and loud bell ringing, tail frizzing out. Philza jumped as well, feathers puffing out, then burst into laughter.

"GET OUT OF BED GRANDPA!!!"

"I'm UP! I'm *up*!" Philza shouted, difficult to hear over the ringing and his own laughter. Philza rolled, sprawling with giggles, and then forced himself out of bed. The ringing did not cease.

"TIME TO START THE DAAAAY," Technoblade continued, grinning wide as he watched his companion stalk up to him, then slap the bell cord out of his hand. Technoblade laughed, Ranboo's ears still ringing faintly, then clapped his hands, closed his eyes with a shallow bow, and grandiosely prayed, "Oh blessings of fortune, please watch after my decrepit, elderly, *feeble* old-man friend this—ah, hey, hey!" Technoblade laughed again as Philza swatted him on the arm, then bumped against Philza's hip on his way to the ladder.

Ranboo smiled as he watched them, lifting his head slightly off the pillow to meet Technoblade's hand as he ruffled his hair in passing. Then he got out of bed and got dressed himself. The bell rang again, much quieter and shorter, and Ranboo looked over to see Philza clap his hands and wait a silent beat, then follow after Technoblade down the ladder.

Hrm.

Ranboo rang the bell, just once, softly, and touched his palms together.

Oh gee now he had to pray for something.

Uhhhh.

Dear Universe, I... mmm, uh, I'm not sure how to phrase it, I wish for good luck with... He blew at one of his bangs and switched languages mentally, ***Please grant me fortune regarding my Ender half.*** Ideally that would mean another visit from Eidvyr, soon, and she might tell him more of his people.

Satisfied, fairly certain that the little, awkward, half-thought-out prayer wouldn't do anything of note, Ranboo went and joined his... friends, for breakfast.

It was still odd to think of them as that.

Still, he lacked a better term.

Philza stood at the stove, Technoblade sat at the crafting table, startings of a cane already in his hands, and Ranboo peeked over Philza's shoulder. Oatmeal, tea, eggs, and strips of fatty meat. "I'm going to let Bob and Ranmoo out while that cooks," he informed quietly, remembering to grab their feed *before* he went to their little shack.

Oh *jeez* Philza was not lying about it being cold today. Okay. Hm. He kind of wanted to reinforce this shack a little. Maybe he could convince his brain to let him go logging today and doll it up a bit. He didn't want his cows having to suffer this biting cold, which seeped into their shack fairly unimpeded at the moment. Fortunately they were hardy, but still! His cows!

With Ranboo milked and the two given the ability to graze (though honestly it was a question if they would, with the outside being this chilly), Ranboo returned inside and the milk bucket took the skillet's place on the stove, the three of them gathering to eat.

"Try this."

Philza took the cane from Technoblade and held it at his side, pacing around the main floor a little bit.

"It's not fancy, but," Technoblade said with a little shrug, watching Philza walk.

"It helps, it helps. It helps a lot; thank you. And it'll do for the time being."

"Exactly. Exaaactly." Technoblade took a seat at the table and Philza and Ranboo followed, the three of them eating in the silence that Ranboo had grown quite comfortable with.

"I was thinking I might try to improve the barn a little bit? Maybe make it more like an actual barn," Ranboo informed them, only slightly nervous about making his own plans and telling other people about them, rather than them telling him. He'd gotten pretty decent at it. At the very least, okay.

"Nice. Hey, you've got a lot of stone laying around from mining yeah?" Philza asked.

"Uh, yup," Ranboo and Technoblade confirmed simultaneously, and Ranboo laughed at the coincidence. They sounded a lot alike when they synced up like that.

"Probably not today on account of my knee and it being so fucking cold out, but I've been thinking about making myself a house of my own."

"HEH?!"

Ranboo felt his stomach twist, his spine snapping straight and his ears flaring. What. Why? Philza was leaving?? Why??? What????

"Woah, woah woah woah woah, if this is about the excessive bell ringing when you're in earshot I can cut back on that," Technoblade immediately launched, half-rising from his seat, his own pink ears pinned flat against his head.

"What, no, Techno, *Techno*, chill! Jesus, I'm not moving far away like last time, we both agreed that was a disaster."

"Yes. We *did*. I thought you liked living here?"

"Mate, chill the *fuck* out! Fuckin' hell man, we're all hoarders and introverts! I've just been wanting my own space; I'll still be right fucking here." Philza gripped Technoblade's hands. "Calm down mate."

Technoblade hovered anxiously a long moment, then sat. He squeezed Philza's hands back. "Right. That's a reasonable thing to want."

"You haven't done anything wrong, I'm not mad at you, and this isn't a bad thing. I'll still be close by and figure I'll keep to our current routine. I *just* want a little elbow room."

Technoblade snorted. “‘Elbow room’ could mean an ocean monument, knowing you.”

“Well, I mean, if there’s one in the area,” Philza mused, then broke off into a little giggle and Technoblade chuckled. Ranboo gripped his frazzled tail and hugged it close to his chest, looking between the two.

Okay. Okay. Philza was just. Going to be close by, instead of in the same house as him and Technoblade. That was. Fine. If Technoblade and Philza both thought it was fine then it’d be fine. Right? Right. They knew what they were doing.

“Ranboo, you chill?” Philza asked, and Ranboo bit his lip and nodded. “Because it’d be okay if you weren’t; I guess I sort of sprung that on you two.”

“Just, you,” Ranboo looked at his feet and tugged at his tail tuft. “It’s just, a pretty big change is all. I, I’m sure I’ll get used to it.”

“Jesus Christ, you two are peas in a pod,” Philza sighed with an exasperated laugh. “Come here; I am initiating a group hug.”

Ranboo slunk over and Philza was, between him and Technoblade, lifted off his short little legs as the three of them stood near their table. “There we go you anxious bags of gunpowder,” Philza murmured, patting Technoblade and Ranboo’s backs. “I’m not going anywhere, I’m just making somewhere I can call ‘my own space,’ you’re both *fine*.”

“I am fine,” Technoblade said stiffly. “I just don’t know where this is coming from all of a sudden.”

“How about the fact that all the chests downstairs are full, or the fact that I keep accidentally grabbing your pick and wearing down the durability which I *know* irritates you, or how neither of us really have anywhere to retreat to when being around people gets to being too much, or how—”

“I am now more aware of where this is coming from.”

Philza laughed, and Ranboo followed Technoblade’s lead in setting Philza down.

Philza pat Ranboo on the upper arm, smiling up at him, and cocked his head. “We could make you your own space too. Give you somewhere to call your own.”

“I, oh, no, I don’t need that, no, thank you, thanks but no, I’m good, I am so good right the way things are right now.”

“I wasn’t thinking you’d have your own house or anything, just like, maybe a room off the side of Techno’s?”

“Really, that isn’t—”

“You could put your dirt blocks in there, instead of dragging the mess all around my house,” Technoblade mused, and Ranboo froze.

Well.

Well.

It. Well. Well, *that* would be nice, yeah, when Technoblade put it that way...

“Put in a cat door with some heavy fabric so they don’t have to be let out, Enderchest could come and go as she pleases and start teaching the kittens about the outdoors,” Philza continued, and yes, that *also* sounded nice. Ranboo had seen a couple rodents skittering about lately, he was sure she’d love to chase them, and also keep them out of the feed for their livestock.

“I, well, um, yeah, that sounds nice...”

“It’d just be a little space you could call your own. You wouldn’t have to do anything with it if you didn’t want to. Just, the ability to shut the door, you know?”

Ranboo *didn’t* know actually. He had exactly zero experience with that, and honestly he wasn’t sure if it’d be any sort of improvement to his already pretty-ideal lifestyle, but he *did* like the idea of having someplace that he could put his dirt blocks from Eidvyr. And creating a way for Enderchest to continue her ecological role as a mouser. He nodded, tugging at his fingers so the knuckles popped, and Technoblade ruffled his hair.

“I could lay out a foundation for your room while you shore up the barn?” Technoblade offered, and Ranboo nodded again. It was Technoblade’s house, he’d want to make sure it all matched and stuff.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. He recorded this in his memory book and then turned to the far more daunting task.

Logging.

Okay. Okay, he was going to—nope, okay, too big of a hurry, he forgot the axe inside, that was a necessary tool, okay, *okay*. Just a minor setback, and it was going to be the only one! Ranboo was determined!

The saplings they’d planted in the wake of the previously felled trees were already pretty large and strong, fertile soil and decayed pieces of night mobs promoting their growth. Oh, looks like that limb had gotten halfway knocked off in a windstorm or something, though, he should prune that so it didn’t leech unnecessary strength from the rest of the tree.

Okay, that settled, *now* no more setbacks. Except he didn’t want to cut down any of the trees that they’d planted recently, they were still just a little small, so he went further out, and oh there was the edge of the tree line, so he’d just double back—which way had he run during his panic attack? There’d been lots of trees there.

Oh a rabbit!!! It was black and white like he was! Did he have—he had golden carrots in his inventory. That was. Such a waste. Was he allowed to waste golden carrots on rabbits? Technoblade and Philza had once assured him that *him* eating golden carrots wasn’t a waste, but this was a wild animal, but he didn’t really have anything else on him and if he left to go get normal carrots it would definitely run away by the time he got back so...

“Hey there,” he called softly, extending the carrot in the rabbit’s direction. It paused, tense, ears up, wide little prey eyes locked on Ranboo. “I won’t hurt you. Here. Eat.”

The allure of food in the snowy lands was clearly something that the rabbit had to weigh carefully. It wasn’t particularly large or well-fed, just making by on the arctic scrub, and Ranboo was very still and his own ears were perked upright, happy and friendly and nonthreatening.

The rabbit slowly scooted forward, then took the carrot from Ranboo's hand and jumped back a few paces. It was too large for the creature to carry far, though, so it dropped it in the snow and set to eating quickly, ears flicking and eyes wary for any sign of incoming danger. Despite the size discrepancy, it ate the whole thing, its little belly protruding to accommodate the food.

"Hey there," Ranboo said, moving smoothly, but not slowly. He managed to get a palm slipped underneath the rabbit, and lifted it as he stood, cradling it against his chest. "Heyyyy, sh sh sh, you are mine now. Yup! Yup, you are mine. This is a thing that is happening now. I think I'll call you... Hmmm," Ranboo pet at the black and white fur as he walked, contemplating. "Ranbunny! Or maybe just Ranbun, for short. I probably shouldn't bring you inside the house, I wouldn't want Max or Enderchest to think you're lunch, so I guess I'll probably put you with Ranmoo. She's my cow, she's named after me just like you are! Are cows and bunnies friends? I hope so."

Ranbun did not seem to care what Ranboo had to say, and was more interested in burrowing into the little crease where Ranboo's arm pressed against his own chest.

"Oh, you're probably cold aren't you buddy?" Ranboo unbuttoned the top of his coat and slipped the rabbit in, hugging his chest to keep the little creature from simply falling all the way down, and rebuttoning all but the top button with his other hand. He giggled as Ranbun moved and settled, snuggling against Ranboo's warmth. "Me too, it's really cold outside today. It's so cold it made my friend's knee act weird, so he's staying inside today. It's still kind of weird for me to think of him as my friend, you know, but I guess talking to a rabbit about it is going to be better than trying to sort out my feelings during an *actual* conversation."

Ranboo hopped over a cluster of rocks, the cabin coming back into view.

"I wonder if you're a boy rabbit or a girl rabbit. You know, I don't actually know how to sex bunnies. Oh, wow, that was a weird sentence to say out loud. That was. Oh boy. I should probably—it's a good thing I don't have these conversations where anybody can hear them. Okay.

"I guess you could be non-binary, like Twitch." Ranboo's ears flared upright and he let out a small, delighted gasp. "Non-*bunnary*!!!! Oh that's great. Oh that is so great, we're definitely going with that, you are Ranbun, the non-bunnary bunny. Ahaha!" Ranboo laughed and nudged open the gate to the little shack, Ranmoo and Bob looking up at his entrance. He kicked the gate closed behind him and sat down in front of them, straw poking into his legs and tail and undoubtedly getting caught in the tufted end.

"Hey you two, this is Ranbun," he announced, pulling the rabbit from his coat and holding them out for Ranmoo and Bob to examine. He set Ranbun down, and they immediately hopped about and found their way into a warm little pile of hay. Ranboo giggled, buttoning his coat back up, and shivered with a flick of his tail.

Oh right! He wanted to shore up the barn today!!

Okay, okay, *now* no distractions! Ranbun was safe with the cows, Ranboo had an axe, he knew which part of the forest he was heading in the direction of, okay, *okay*, he had this, he totally had this. He was *focusing*.

Maybe next time he rang the blessed bell he would pray for fortune regarding his attention span. That would be good. Should he do that now?

No, no, no no no, *now* he was going to go fell a couple trees and make the barn a little sturdier. He was on his way. His axe was in his hands. He could *see* the part of the forest just past where they'd planted. Okay. Okay. He was raising his axe, he was swinging, and he let out a small rush of air as the metal struck the wood.

See? He'd done it. He was here. He was mid-task, which meant he was good. He'd made it!

What was that sound?

Twenty minutes later, the first tree hit the snowy ground and Ranboo sighed at himself. He felled a second, just to be sure, and cut the wood into inventory-able chunks. After, he pondered cutting down a third, just to be on the safe side, and tapped his foot as he considered a nearby tree.

He walked around it slowly, musing if he would even *need* all that wood, and he knew Technoblade still had wood in his chests if Ranboo just needed a couple extra pieces to finish off whatever he was doing, and that was a nice grass block he saw just sorta jutting out there so he went ahead and picked that up as he continued to pace slowly around the tree, and honestly he'd already kind of wasted plenty of time that day so if he wanted to have the barn done by the time things started getting colder he should probably get a move on, plus he still needed to replant saplings to replace the trees he'd cut down, and—

Wait a second.

He stared down at his hands. At the grass block in his hands. He.

Wait. Wait, what?

Waaaait. He paced back to the place he'd picked it up from, the barren dirt free of sprouting grass or fallen snow as incriminating as the block itself. WAIT a second.

"I?" he gasped aloud to himself, looking from the grass, to the spot, to his hands. "I did—that?"

He did that?

Slowly, like gravity was dialed down for the moment, he sank to his knees in the snow, half-numb before the patch of dirt. He hugged the block to his belly, curling around it, tail pulled in, and he sank his claws into the soothing texture of frozen soil.

No way. No way no way no way. He'd tried this before! He *knew* he had! And he'd always, always, always, always failed. He'd never been able to—why *now* of all times—what had—*how* had—

He placed his block in his inventory, careful to give it its own slot, and then reached forward again. He took a deep breath, something reverberating behind his diaphragm, and his claws touched the frozen dirt and—

Smooth as a knife through butter, smooth like watching Eidvyr do it, smooth like he'd seen other Endermen, in another time. His hands passed through the dirt and he couldn't breathe, could scarcely believe it, fear choking him that it might stop halfway through, that he would be left with his hands stuck in the frozen dirt, marvel choking him that he was doing this at all.

The dirt pulled up, easy as lifting a lid from a container, and Ranboo hugged it to his belly, doubled over it, then straightened almost frantically and pulled the first block out of his inventory, holding

one in each hand.

He.

He'd.

Don't cry. Don't cry don't cry don't cry don't cry. If he cried it'd hurt and he didn't want pain, not now, not with this, with *this*, with *this*!

He laughed, wet and half-hysteric, and placed the second block into his inventory, then curled around the first, pressing his face into the frozen scrub. He'd done this. He'd done this, after so long, after a *lifetime* of wanting to, and now, *in* his hands, he, he could—on *purpose* too and, and—don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.

He stumbled up onto foalish legs, their weakness sending him back down onto one knee. He took a deep breath, tried again, and succeeded in rising that time, then took off with a rabbit pulse and wagging tail for home.

"Technoblade!" Ranboo called as soon as he was inside the fenceline, waving at him. Technoblade looked up from where he stood perched on the foundations of a room, attached to the main floor and propped up on stone.

"Technoblade! Technoblade! Look, look!" Ranboo beckoned, gasping around the exertion and his own delight.

"I am looking," Technoblade said, vaguely nonplussed, as he hopped down from the stone wall. His head tilted, one ear cocked, as Ranboo sank back down to his knees, on purpose that time, and Ranboo ignored him in favor of stowing the block away in his inventory.

"Watch, look," Ranboo urged, pressing his hands briefly against his diaphragm and feeling something hum in agreement with him, in agreement, more than agreement, its desires were his own, and he reached down, down, into the earth, into the frozen soil, rapt, tail frizzed at the idea that perhaps nerves from someone else watching would be what made it fail, but he didn't, he didn't fail, it didn't snap, it didn't gut out on him, he pulled the grass block from the earth and laughed again, wet and shaking and overwhelmed with it all.

"Look at what I can do!"

"Yoooooooooooo!" Technoblade crouched down onto his haunches, arms braced against his thighs and hooves digging into the snow. Ranboo laughed again, incredulous and exuberant, part of his brain still just adamantly refusing to process this was actually happening. Like really, actually happening. Like he'd blink and he'd be back wherever he'd been doing whatever he'd been doing and none of this was real.

"I, I, touch it, hold it, look, it's real, it's real," Ranboo said, pushing the block towards Technoblade, his words more a reassurance for himself.

"Yea-p. Sure is," Technoblade confirmed, turning the block this way and that, then dropping its full weight into one palm. "Figure you can do that with other blocks too?"

Ranboo hadn't even considered that. He'd been too excited with the grass and dirt. "Maybe? Maybe?? I can try!"

He stood, glancing around. The closest blocks that weren't actively currently part of the house itself were the stones Technoblade had been laying. Well. Good a choice as any. He approached them, one hand extended forward, the other fisted nervously at his abdomen, but he took a steadying breath and.

Those were his hands.

His hands.

His hands, sinking into the stone, cutting through it slowly, much slower than the grass and dirt, but sinking in nevertheless, and his hands, prying the stone from its place, except it wasn't prying. It didn't feel like prying. Prying was too—forceful. Though slower, it was again akin to pulling a lid from a tin, some resistance, but none that might make Ranboo think he could not pull it from its place.

"How am I doing this?" Ranboo breathed, giggles lacing his words, tail wagging so hard his thin body swayed slightly with each wave.

He looked over to Technoblade, whose only answer was a simple, "Bruuuuuuuuuh!" Ranboo laughed again, louder, his whole body jittery and alight and buzzing and too much but in a way where he needed to *do* something to go somewhere to do something do anything run and leap and climb the nearest tree with his claws sinking into its bark or flop about in the snow mindlessly and inelegantly or something *something*! He just!

He'd never...

"I thought," he gasped, staving off tears once again. "I thought I couldn't. I hadn't, been able to, before. I." He broke out in wet laughter, sinking down to his knees again and splaying his palms out flat against the snow-dusted scrub at the foundation, stone block left forgotten near his knees. "I *can*," he said, like that was somehow enough to describe the *years* of wishing and wanting and *aching* and knowing it was never his to have. Never. Never ever, but now, here, *now*, in this place, in this moment, it was finally his to have.

"Wonder what else you can grab," Technoblade mused, passing the dirt block back to Ranboo, who took it happily. "Oh, Phil should see this, hey Phiiiiii! Phiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii! Alright Phil's dead I guess, rip to that guy." Technoblade rounded to climb the stairs, opening the door and calling once again.

"Alright, alright, Jesus Christ, what?" Philza laughed, fastening his coat as he walked out the door and visibly, immediately regretting that. "Fucking hell, it's cold as balls out here, mate!"

"Philza!" Ranboo called, slipping the dirt block in his hands into his inventory. His inventory was going to be nothing but wood and dirt blocks at this point. Oh yeah the wood! He'd been shoring up the barn. Well, he'd do that in a minute. "Philza, look what I can do!"

It would never get old. This would *never* get old. He watched his own hands sink into the frozen ground with the same rapt delight he'd had when showing Technoblade, the same disbelieving awe as when he knelt in the forest.

Philza whistled. "Now how'd you do that?" he asked with one hand on his knee and the other on his cane, his wings mantling slightly, but the wool cozies negating any discomfort Ranboo might have felt at that.

“I don’t know! I don’t know. I just, *did* it while I was out logging, and then I tried to do it on purpose and I *can*! I can, I can actually do it, I,” Ranboo broke off laughing again, unable to stop himself, the marvel of it all still thrumming through him like a pulse, like his very breath. “I don’t know how, I just *can*. I can, I can.” Ranboo curled around this new dirt block, tail wagging and kicking up every flake of snow in an arch behind him, and he just hummed and hugged the frozen grass and tried his hardest not to cry.

“Good thing we’re making you somewhere you can put those, then,” Philza remarked, and Ranboo made a happy noise and nodded, words beyond him now.

Philza and Technoblade let him have his moment, Philza’s warm, gloved hand pressed against the back of his neck, Technoblade resettling the stone back in its place and resuming working, though he kept to the bits that were closest to where Ranboo was kneeling. When Ranboo finally had it in him to look up, he was met with Philza’s kind face, and he smiled.

“I just, never thought I’d be able to,” Ranboo tried to explain, eyes flicking down to Philza’s shoulder, his voice gone all strange and—happy. Not that the happiness was strange; he felt it so often, living with Technoblade and Philza. Just. Maybe his hearing was off or something; his voice scarcely sounded like his own. Too many emotions.

“That’s great, mate. But maybe you shouldn’t just kneel here stone still in the cold?”

Oh, yeah, Ranboo *was* cold. He let himself be helped to his feet and pulled gently indoors, Philza nudging him towards the fireplace and Ranboo obeying without complaint.

“Um,” Ranboo bit his lip, staring at the flames rather than Philza. “Uh, um, do you think, Technoblade would mind? If I, if I just *held* the block? I wouldn’t be setting it down or anything.”

Ranboo jumped when a blanket came down around his shoulders, and Philza winked when he looked up. “I won’t tell him if you won’t.”

Ranboo ducked his head, grinning a little, and wrapped his arms around the first block he’d pulled up on purpose. So, the second block, then. Hm. He should label these.

Well, he had wood in his inventory, he could make signs.

It was only when he was seated at the crafting table, a sign for each block of dirt in his inventory made and ready for writing, that he remembered oh yeah.

The *barn*.

Okay. Okay. He’d had the chance to warm up. He was *focusing*.

He started by making Ranbun a little enclosure of their own, small and insulated with an opening only they could fit into. They seemed to like it, given that the moment Ranboo set the completed thing down, they hopped right on in. He chuckled.

Oh, he probably shouldn’t feed them golden carrots indefinitely. He went inside, grabbed some carrot seeds, and planted a row of carrots along their growing little plot.

Okay, that done he—Oh!!!! Oh he’d forgotten to update his memory book!! Oh and when such *important* events were happening, how could he have forgotten???

Well, okay. Maybe he knew the answer to that last one.

Okay, he could lift grass blocks with his hands, he'd shown Philza and Technoblade, he'd planted carrots and made Ranbun a little house of their own—

The *barn!*

Okay okay okay okay no more distractions *no more* distractions he had this he was gonna do this okay, ooooookay.

“No, Bob, that’s not where your horns go!”

What had he been doing?

The barn. The. Barn.

Philza called him and Technoblade in for lunch via communicator.

Right.

After lunch! He made a note in his memory book. After lunch he was going to do this!

By dinner, he'd gotten about halfway through. Was he cursed? Was wood his curse? Could he just not do things that involved wood? Honestly, if that was the tradeoff for him being able to pick up grass blocks, it was worth it, it was so worth it, nothing could've ever been more worth it.

Oh! He pulled out his memory book.

I rang the bell this morning. I prayed for fortune.

“Um, can I, go ring the bell again?” Ranboo asked.

Technoblade didn't even look up from where he was washing dishes, and Philza only granted him a passing glance from his blueprints. “Sure; if you wait a minute I'll join you.”

That... did sound nice. But also, Ranboo wanted to do this now.

He climbed the ladder, rang the bell, and clapped his hands.

Hello Universe. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

He opened his eyes and dropped his hands. Again, he didn't *feel* different. He wondered if he ever would.

The ladder creaked as Technoblade ascended, and Ranboo smiled as he side-stepped, letting the man at the bell. Technoblade rang it, as Ranboo saw him do every morning, clapped his hands, and did not close his eyes, but stared vacantly forward for a long moment. Ranboo was silent, but... not on edge. Not even really *waiting*, if he was being honest, just.

Content, maybe? Was this what patience felt like? Ranboo wasn't sure if patience was a thing that could be felt. Contentment was, though, and Ranboo was content to stand and wait, tail swaying slowly behind him, for Technoblade to drop his hands and shake himself lightly. Ranboo followed him back down to the main floor, and noted that the sun was setting earlier and earlier, nowadays.

He was pretty sure. They'd only have a little light left for the day, and he was pretty sure it used to stay lighter longer and—

The *barn*.

He did not get it finished before it was too cold and dark to keep working, but he did get close! He counted that as its own victory, and rewarded himself by playing with the cats until it was bedtime.

Interestingly, he was not in bed, happily sandwiched between Philza and Technoblade, when he woke up. He was not in the bed in general, actually. Or the house. And also it was not daytime yet, the moon high in the sky.

Ranboo blinked, disoriented, *upright* amongst other things. His ears slowly folded back as he surveyed first his left, then his right.

Right, down.

Technoblade.

Was he always this much taller than the man? He felt his spine relax into a familiar slouch, and why had he been standing so tall?

“Technoblade?” Ranboo asked, quiet, confused.

“Hey. You back?”

Ranboo's frown deepened. He nodded. “I, think so? Where was I?”

Technoblade clicked his tongue. “Uhhhhhhhhhhh I dunno. I do not know the answer to that question. You were not exactly acting like yourself.”

“I, wasn't?”

“For one thing, you were talking in Ender.”

“Voidspeak,” Ranboo corrected without thinking.

“Voidspeak. For another thing, you did not seem entirely conscious.”

“Oh.”

They stared at each other. Technoblade sighed.

“Come inside, you're gonna get frostbite.”

Ranboo looked down at himself. He was in his nightclothes, Technoblade's cape around his shoulders but his feet only in socks, and Technoblade stood with his coat held closed around his middle but not fastened.

“What... happened?” Ranboo asked, allowing himself to be led by the hand back indoors.

“I think you might have been sleepwalking,” Technoblade grunted, and he was moving so *fast*, why was he moving so fast, Ranboo wanted to slow down, meander maybe, his legs were long but he

could take slow strides. “You just, got up, dude, no warning! And left the house without a coat or anything! What am I supposed to do about that?”

“Your cape?”

“Yeah, I put my cape on you. Chat’s been going absolutely nuts about you getting cold. And just sort of nuts in general. They were actually the ones who woke me up, you were dead silent when you moved. You started talking once you were outside. You were not interested in going back inside though,” Technoblade said as Ranboo was once again made to sit in front of the fire, Technoblade feeding more wood into the embers and stoking it, coaxing the flame to life. “So I just kinda kept an eye on you? I dunno man, I didn’t want to wake Philza up but now I kinda wish I had; he’s better at this.”

“You both keep on saying that the other is better at things. I think maybe you’re both good at stuff.”

“Ranboo, are you *sure* you’re like, all the way awake?” Technoblade asked, and, hm.

Ranboo pulled out his memory book, and started writing.

“Bruhhhhhhh.”

Ranboo blinked and looked up at his distressed friend. “I’m okay,” Ranboo said. “I don’t know if I’m awake, though. I think I’m awake. I’m—tired, though.”

“Yeah,” Technoblade huffed, waiting for Ranboo to finish writing. When he closed his memory book, Technoblade held a hand out to him. “Let’s go back to bed, okay? We’ll figure out what this is in the morning.”

“Okay,” Ranboo agreed, taking the hand obediently. “I need to finish the barn in the morning.” That was important.

“Sure. I’ll help you out. Or make Phil do it.”

“He’s cold.”

“He’ll be fine,” Technoblade assured, nudging Ranboo to start climbing the ladder, “He’s not *that* old yet.”

“Okay.”

Ranboo laid down on the soft mattress, gentle imprints of their heat still trapped, Philza snoring lightly in his place. He wriggled under his wing, pressing his face against Philza’s hair, and Technoblade held him from behind. This was, most fortunately, the position he woke up in.

Hm. Why would that be weird though?

Well, usually he faced Technoblade, but he had the *distinct* feeling that he’d forgotten something, so as Technoblade got up and Philza complained about damn early risers, he took out his memory book.

Hello me. I do not think I am all the way awake right now. Technoblade called it sleep-walking. Say hi to him and Philza for me :)

Ranboo squinted. That. Seemed vaguely ominous. But he'd left himself a little smiley face to put himself at ease, so it was probably fine? He uh, he didn't usually write in Voidscript, that was... definitely new.

"Technoblade?" Ranboo asked, and the man paused in his morning routine, one sock on and the other held in his hand as he turned a keen eye on Ranboo. Ranboo tried not to shrink from it. "Did I, uh, sleepwalk? Last night?"

"Ayup."

"Wait really?" Philza asked. Ranboo frowned down at his book.

"Apparently I wanted to say hello to you both while I was sleepwalking?"

"Well you were heading the wrong direction for it; you just got up and left. I had to drag you back here."

"Sorry."

"How'd I sleep through all this?"

"The sound of your own snoring masked our—ahaha, hey, hey!" Technoblade laughed as he raised an arm, defending himself from Philza's swatting.

Philza laughed, but then quieted. "Dooooo we figure this is something to be concerned about?"

"I, don't think so sir?"

"Call me Phil."

"No sir. Um, maybe if it becomes a regular thing?"

"Yeah." Technoblade paused, hand just below the blessed bell cord. "Hey, actually. Do we think this is some sort of brain weirdness?"

"Uhm," Ranboo balked.

"Like, trauma related brain weirdness. Some sort of," Technoblade waved his hand, "manifestation of somethin'."

"Could be," Philza remarked, and Ranboo felt himself shrink against the mattress, drawing the blanket closer. He still wasn't *entirely* sure on what the word "trauma" meant, at least, what it meant for *him*, but he'd been doing so good about acting free lately, hadn't he? He supposed he didn't really have a rubric or anything, but still, he hadn't thought—

"We're getting on towards midwinter. Puffy was saying she wanted to be home around the new calendar, right?"

Ranboo discreetly pulled out his memory book, searching for that name.

"Oh yeah, the good captain should be back in comm range here soonish! If she isn't already."

Captain? Captain... That felt like it should be familiar. Where, OH!

Technoblade rang the bell.

Oh, right, one of the conditions of him staying here was that he would have a long conversation with the captain and then pay her a visit. He had, surprising no one, forgotten.

He swallowed nervously, feeling his hands shake minutely. He closed and put away the book, his tail curled close to his chest under the blanket. This was. This was going to be *important*. He wasn't sure what was expected of him, with this, if she could somehow deem him unfit to stay here with Technoblade and Philza or if she'd do something to make his brain better for them or *what*—maybe she was a witch?

He'd always been told to steer clear of witches and their cauldrons, but surely not all of them could be bad. They probably just didn't want strangers barging into their homes and stealing their potions or something. Ranboo wouldn't want strangers barging into where he lived and taking things he'd worked hard on either, all told. So maybe this was a good witch? Maybe she'd brew a potion that'd fix his brain. Or maybe she'd confirm what Technoblade and Philza already suspected, that Ranboo wasn't fit to live with them, that someone else could fix him better. Or maybe she'd confirm what Ranboo feared: that he wasn't fit to be free at all.

“Hey.”

Ranboo glanced up, jolted really, with the soft word and Technoblade's fingers grazing his forehead, pushing his bangs from his eyes. He chirped reflexively, inquisitive and startled.

“You got lost in your own head there for a second mate,” Philza informed, sounding concerned.

“Sorry, sirs.”

That was the wrong thing to say.

Ranboo's ears pinned back at their immediately deepened frowns, body curling tighter.

Idiot, needy, making them worry about you over nothing, waste of space waste of their time, stupid little—

“Yeah, let's see if we can't call Puffy today.”

Technoblade's fingers left his forehead and Ranboo pulled the blanket up over his head. It was childish. It was stupid, and pathetic, and would probably only make them more concerned, and why couldn't he just act *normal*, and nothing bad was even *happening*, and he should do better, he wanted to prove to them that he *was* better, that he was recovered, and acting free, and all this business with the captain really wouldn't be necessary, but all he managed was curling in a little huddled heap.

A hand, Philza's, pressed against his shoulder through the blanket.

“Do you want to be left alone a moment?”

His voice was gentle, careful, kind, and Ranboo felt so *stupid* for making him feel like he needed to.

But Philza had asked Ranboo what he wanted, and he wanted...

He sighed, and pulled the blanket off himself. He wanted to get it over with. “No sir. I’ll get dressed and go downstairs.”

“Okay,” Philza said dubiously, but if he didn’t believe Ranboo, he didn’t call him out on it.

Okay. Okay! He’d known this was coming. Sure, he’d forgotten it, but he’d *known* about it. Forgetting was his fault. He knew that he had to do this, that this conversation and subsequent visit were mandatory if he wanted to keep living here.

God.

He pressed a hand to his mouth, anxiety twisting in his stomach. Whatever happened, whatever was going to happen (and he didn’t know, he had no idea, it was as formless and unknown as most of his past (he’d grown unused to that feeling, somewhere along the line)), his life here literally *depended* on it. And he had no idea what was expected of him. He had no idea how he could possibly do it right.

Had he been told? Somewhere in that awful, terrible conversation, had it been explained to him? Had he simply failed to write it down? Idiot. Why hadn’t he done better?

What was going to happen to him?

Well, he wasn’t going to figure it out by just standing here staring at his sleeve cuffs. He decided that if there was ever a day he needed fortune from the Universe, it was today, so he rang the bell.

Please, he prayed, to the Universe, to Eut’Oob, to Prime, to any god that could hear him, *help*.

He didn’t eat much for breakfast. When Technoblade settled onto the couch and held open his cape, Ranboo darted in close and clung to his side, tail curled and ears pressed to his skull and nose buried in Technoblade’s tabard.

Maybe she wouldn’t even be back in range, yet. Maybe today would be fine, and they could just. Go mining, like normal.

“You okay?” Technoblade asked him gently, cape hiding most of Ranboo from the world and fingers pressed to Ranboo’s hair.

“I just. I. I just—the conversation, with the captain, I…”

Technoblade squeezed him briefly closer. “I get it. I don’t like calling people either. It’s a terrible form of communication and we should all collectively ban it; but sometimes we have to.”

Ranboo nodded. Oh, he hadn’t even factored that in. Would *he* have to be the one to call her? He only recently got used to the idea of calling Technoblade or Philza, it felt like. No, wait, he didn’t even know *how* to contact her, their communicators weren’t synced up.

“Um. Um, who, who’s going to call her?”

“Probably Phil, since he’s the one who insisted on this.”

Philza let out a loud “bah!” from his seat and scratched at his hair, displacing his hat briefly.

“You’re so useless at this mate,” he said with a little chuckle.

“Okay, group feature,” Philza said, lighting up all three of their communicators.

“Loud and clear,” Technoblade confirmed.

“I can hear you,” Ranboo said, much quieter. Okay. Okay, now, *now*, they were doing this now, they were having this conversation with Captain Puffy now, the thing that Ranboo’s entire life hinged on was happening *now* with no warning or preparation Philza had just started and it was happening it was *happening* his stomach felt tight enough to vomit he shouldn’t have eaten breakfast he shouldn’t have eaten anything at all he clung to Technoblade and pressed against him as close as he could, wishing he could squeeze himself so close that he stopped existing altogether and could just hide away under Technoblade’s arm forever and never have to think or talk ever again and—

“Hello!?”

A woman’s voice, zesty and *loud*, made Ranboo jolt, surging against Technoblade’s unmoving middle and squeezing desperately tight, his body little more than a black and white ball with arms that was curled under Technoblade’s cape.

“Hey Puffy,” Philza greeted congenially, Ranboo’s heart pitter patter in his chest. “How goes the voyage?”

“It goes *well*, thanks for asking! It’s good to hear from you; it’s been ages! How are things with you and Techno and Wilby?”

Wilby?

The childish endearment startled Ranboo badly enough that he almost forgot how anxious he was, for a second there.

Almost.

“Up and down lately, actually. W—”

“Ohhh noooooooooez, what happened?!?!?” Captain Puffy asked, her voice gone all high and almost—nasal? Was nasal the word? Maybe not nasal, just, her voice, it had this *quality*.

“Well, we got attacked. Some government officials weren’t exactly fond of our anarchist beliefs.”

Technoblade snorted.

“Oh I bet. Was that Technoblade I heard on the line?”

“Halloooooo.”

“Heeyyyy!!! But okay so *you guys* are good though then, right?”

“Yeah, fine fine, hardly a scratch. We’re living in a cabin up north nowadays. Will’s got some sort of residence set up in the Central Kingdom.”

“Oh well I’ll be sure to say hi to him; I’m heading that way to visit my own son!”

She was so. Perky.

“Nice, nice. Ah, speaking of people in our care, though,” Philza said, and Ranboo tensed further, that was him, he was in their care, not a son but a part of this—whatever it was, nonetheless. And the reason for the call. He shook, and the only reason his body didn’t shake itself into shattered pieces was because Technoblade’s hand pet slow, long strokes against his back. “We’re living with a young man named Ranboo nowadays. He’s actually on the call with us.”

“Hi Ranboo!!”

“H-Hello, Captain.”

“D’aaaaaaw! You sound so *sweet!!!*”

“He’s rather shy,” Philza explained, or maybe warned, “He probably won’t say much, but we all wanted to ask: Puffy, you ran a therapy business at one point, yeah?”

Her tone couldn’t possibly be more different, its playful excitement popped like a soap bubble. “Yeah, yeah I did. I still have the building, too, why?” Respectful, concerned, not *serious* necessarily, but far more serious than she had been. Ranboo had to remind himself to breathe. Technoblade squeezed at the nape of his neck.

“When I was captured, I encountered Ranboo as a slave on the estate I was being held at. Y’know, leading up to my state-sanctioned execution.”

“Oh, god,” Captain Puffy murmured, “I’m glad you both made it out of there.”

“Same, actually,” Technoblade agreed playfully. “But given the whole, y’know, excessive and continuous violation of his basic rights as a person, Ranboo’s got some, eh, hangups?”

“We were hoping to speak with you as a professional, both him talking to you one on one as well as any advice you can give Techno and I for how we can help him best.”

“Of course, of course, absolutely! Like, off the top of my head or?”

“We were hoping to do an in-person visit, actually. Stay in the Central Kingdom for a bit, catch up with Will and everyone while we’re there. Provided that works for you?”

“Uhhhh, yeah, I can’t think of why it wouldn’t. I’m actually only about a week out from the Badlands; I plan on docking there and trading most of my cargo at that port. Depending on how long it takes, we could meet up in the Central Kingdom in ahhhhh, two weeks maybe? I know Sam’ll watch my stuff if I don’t trade everything I want to before then, so that shouuuuldn’t be an issue.”

“Or,” Technoblade interjected, “We meet you at the Badlands in a week-ish, I chill with Skeppy and Bad until you’re ready to head over, we travel to the CK together.”

Across from him, Philza shrugged. “Sounds fine by me.”

“That works! Okay, but first, Ranboo.”

Ranboo barely stopped himself from digging his claws into Technoblade, instead directing that energy into squeezing around his waist as hard as Ranboo possibly could. “Yes, Captain?”

“Would you like to attend therapy?”

Would he *like* to? No. No, he would not enjoy a single aspect of this, he was certain. But he knew what answer he needed to give, the one that he'd agreed to months ago, begging to stay.

"Yes, Captain."

"Alright. All conversations and correspondence between us that in any way shape or form can be classified as therapeutic will be strictly confidential on my part. Meaning: you can say whatever you want about our therapy sessions, but I can't say a word about what you tell me to anyone unless given direct, uncoerced permission from you. As your therapist it will be my task to help conduct a game plan to assist in meeting your personal goals and provide the necessary tools and framework to do so. As my patient it will be your task to speak as honestly as possible with me and to give it your best shot. Which basically means: I'm the professional here, all I'm asking you to do is try. Sound good?"

She sure had just said a lot of words to him. But, they sounded good? Ish? Maybe? She was going to help him meet goals, and he was pretty sure that was the part that was important to Philza and Technoblade.

"Yes, Captain."

"And I'll give you a written, *official* document of all that when we get to my office; I just like to keep everybody briefed."

She paused. She seemed to be waiting for a response?

"Yes, Captain."

"And just so you know, you don't *have* to call me Captain all the time, Puffy is just fine."

If Ranboo's body wound any tighter he was going to end up snapping his own bones. Maybe if he did, he wouldn't have to go through with this, ha.

"Sorry, sorry, I—"

"It's okey-dokey if you *do* call me Captain though! I worked pretty hard for that title."

Ranboo blinked. *Okey-dokey*. That. Was not a word people generally used—with him—he.

"Okay," he said quietly.

"Great! I'll see you boys in about a week-ish, then!"

"See you," Philza said agreeably.

"Seeya. And thanks, Puffy, we appreciate it."

"Pshaw, it's my job! One of my jobs. And besides, after all the help you gave me I owe it to you anyway. Bye Ranboo, see you later!"

"G-Goodbye, Captain Puffy."

She made a high, cute noise as the comms cut off, and Ranboo slumped, shivering and *weak*, his limbs feeling like if he tried to stand or move or pick something up it'd all just go clattering to the

floor, himself along with it. Technoblade shifted, pulling Ranboo up, up into his lap, and Ranboo ineffectively gripped at Technoblade's sleeves as his head was guided into the furred neckline of Technoblade's cape.

He breathed, familiar, warm, hidden, protected, *comforted*, a good comfort, a kind comfort, a familiar one, and he shook silently, clinging weaker than a kitten (and he had that frame of reference now), and let himself be held.

Philza's hand pressed to his hair, but the man didn't say anything, just pet him briefly before walking off, leaving Ranboo in Technoblade's arms.

Ranboo was—

Exhausted, actually, and it was only just morning.

But, but maybe he wouldn't try to rush this. Maybe he'd just. Let himself be held. He could be held, and pet, and comforted, and then he'd milk Ranmoo and feed Enderchest and the kittens and he could exercise Max a bit before he went mining, mining was always soothing, repetitive, he liked mining—

Oh wait, the *barn*!

Chapter End Notes

Okay so I've got a wedding I'm attending this week, so it's VERY probable that we're gonna take a week hiatus. If I DO somehow get the next chapter finished before then we'll have a regular update, but the chances of that are low. I'll see you whenever I see you next <3

Comments/concrit appreciated <3

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He did, by some miracle, get the barn finished. Ranboo and Technoblade also built the rest of Ranboo's room, about the size of the upper floor, with a cat door and some shelving for Enderchest and the kittens to perch on. He had his grass blocks proudly displayed there, the signs stuck in them, "**Eidvyrt's** first gift," "First block (accidental)," "First intentional block," and so on and so forth. Then he realized he wanted to hold the blocks, pick them up and feel the texture with happy pride, so he took the signs out and set them on the walls. Other than that, he had a small fireplace near the cat door to keep too much heat from escaping.

He shut the door exactly once, just to see if it'd trigger whatever Philza meant when he'd said "the ability to shut the door."

He'd just. Uh. Kinda stood there, and stared at it.

The front door, he got! Of course he needed to shut the front door, there were night mobs on the other side of it, and they wandered longer and longer each night as the sunlight waned. But there were no mobs inside the house, unless he counted his own self (Endermen weren't mobs, not really, but they were often lumped together with them in conversation).

He opened the door again, feeling kind of stupid. He was inclined to call it a total waste of time, even, but Philza'd been the one to suggest it, and it wasn't his fault if Ranboo just. Didn't get it?

The blocks, though! That, he got. That he was very happy about. Mm-hm mm-hm!

It was a nice distraction, really, from the impending stormcloud that loomed over his head, threatening to burst forth in now-less-than-a-week-ish.

Every time he thought of Captain Puffy and what was going to happen with her (not that he knew what was going to happen), he had to pause and collect himself. Take deep breaths. Try to convince his brain to think about *literally anything else*. He wished he had non-mindless chores. He even went out logging instead of mining, just because he knew he sucked so much at it, and would get distracted, where mining would allow him to recede into his own thoughts and his own thoughts always went right back to Captain Puffy and what was going to happen and how his whole entire life was contingent on it happening and breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Why was he being successful at logging, right now?

A few days ago he would've *prayed* to be able to focus on the task, and now, here he was, no distractions. Just the axe, and the wood, and his thoughts.

At least planting saplings went pretty well. Yeah, that was going fine.

Finally, he switched to drastic measures, and stayed out late hunting skeletons to grind their bones into meal, which he could pat around the saplings' roots. Yes, to make up for chopping down just so *many* trees, but also because he couldn't think about other things when he was fighting skeletons

and fending off all the other night mobs while he was at it. He had to focus on actually fighting, protecting himself. It was one of the only things that calmed him, at this point.

But, Captain Puffy and their upcoming trip was also the main topic of conversation for Technoblade and Philza, and any time either of them mentioned it Ranboo felt a gush of acid in his stomach that just made him want to die. Whyyyyyyyy??? Couldn't they just ignore it until it was literally impossible to ignore? Couldn't they burn that right down to the wire?

But arrangements were necessary: packing (clothes, some food for the trip, host/hostess gifts), what animals would come with (Max, Twitch, and Carl), what to do with the animals that stayed behind (the cows would temporarily fall under the care of the kindly butcher Ranboo had once spoken to, the cats would have some food left out but then fend for themselves, old enough to do so now, and Ranbun would have full range of the barn to hop about in, with more food than their own body weight ten times over).

Ranboo wanted a *distraction* from it all.

“Hey, Ranboo, want to help me make my house?”

He would like a *different* distraction!

But he also wanted to know where Philza would be, where to go so he could find his friend. He nodded, got his coat on, and pulled out his memory book, ready to write down the location. Actually. He swapped it out for his instruction book, so he would have clear, easily located instructions on how to get there. Yes, that was smarter.

“Alright,” Philza said, thumping a chest down into the brittle scrub. It hadn't snowed for a while, so the ground was nearly clear of the powder, even though it was cold enough that it was dry and packed, “help me pull stone from the ground floor and get it in chests out here?”

Ranboo nodded as Philza dropped down another large chest, and then a third. It seemed... odd, to move them such a short distance, only to move them again later, but Philza was the builder, Ranboo was just there to help.

He came out with a full inventory of stone and cobble and blinked at the large rectangle Philza had dug, just a few paces away from Technoblade's cabin. It was. “Uh.”

“Just drop ‘em in the chests, mate! I dunno how much I'm going to need but for now let's just fill those and build from there!”

“Oh, okay... okay, okay!” Ranboo repeated, brightening, tail lifting and ears perking upright.

When, when Philza had said, Ranboo expected—

“Oh,” Technoblade gasped, stepping out of his front door, Max bounding down the steps to conduct his business. “Phil! You're building your house right there?”

“Yeah. Why, did you like the view this way or something?”

“Nah, nah nah nah. Just.” Even from here, Ranboo could hear the relief in Technoblade's voice. “Glad you're sticking so close.”

Philza paused, squinting, and looked between Technoblade and Ranboo.

“Did... you two think I was going to make my house somewhere far away?”

Ranboo felt faintly embarrassed, but. Yeah, he nodded, he had.

“You’re both the *worst!*” Philza laughed, bending with his hands on his knees. “Oh my god, *Max* has less ‘oh no you’re going away forever’ separation anxiety than you do!”

“You didn’t say *where* you were building the house!” Technoblade shouted, voice pitched high and defensive.

“Technoblade is right,” Ranboo muttered, and Philza laughed so hard he had to sit down.

“Ohhh, god!” he squeaked. “Fucking hell! Okay, okay, I’m good, I’m—” Philza burst into another peal of giggles, “—I’m good!”

Technoblade crossed to the hole, hopped down, and swatted Philza, then hugged him and lifted him off the ground. Philza closed his wings around them briefly, and Ranboo admired the wing cozies once again.

Technoblade ended up helping as well, Max panting about their shins as they worked, and Ranboo and Technoblade would occasionally pause to toss a stick for him to chase after. Twitch settled on Philza’s shoulder for most of it, cuddling up against his warmth and complaining “Cold!” every now and again, to which Philza informed them that if they wanted to warm up they should’ve flown back in when they were still hauling stone and cobble outside.

Philza had finished drawing up all the blueprints the night before, and so Ranboo just followed those outlines as best he could, tweaking or altering the placement at Philza’s command. Interestingly enough, Philza had spent much more time planning than the three of them actually spent building.

The empty stone house was beautiful, when finished, but cold, and kind of hollow. Philza moved the now-empty chests inside, set a crafting table down, and above the balcony door he hung a picture of himself, his son, and grandchild posing together just outside the inn they’d stayed in during their trip to the city.

“Alright, that should be good for today,” Philza remarked, and it was a good thing, too. Between the three of them, they’d gotten it finished just *barely* before dark. “What do we want for dinner?”

“We should still have some venison lying around somewhere,” Technoblade mused, stretching his arms high above his head and popping his back.

“Mm,” Philza hummed, shaking out his wings as they walked back inside, Twitch flying in to perch by the fire with a loud, pointed caw the moment the door opened. “Ugh, I feel gross, but it’s cold enough I don’t want to bathe.”

“Warmer than it was a few days ago.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I mean, I don’t think you smell that bad.”

Philza snorted. “Mate, I was *there* when you got the scar that fucked up your nose.”

“Yeah, and, I don’t think you smell bad.”

They laughed.

“You need a bath as well; *my* nose works just fine. Ranboo should probably clean up before we visit the good captain, too,” Philza mused, the two turning to look at him briefly.

He locked up.

“Oh, yeah, uh, yeah, you’re probably, right.”

He... was not enthused by the idea of having scalded palms while in a new place with a new person and doing something so horrifically important, but it made sense. He’d gotten a little stale.

He was fortunate that his body didn’t sweat, so as long as he changed and washed his clothes regularly, all he really had to worry about was his hands, tail, and face. He didn’t make a habit of getting those overly dirty, so as long as he combed his tail out he was fine. But. Well. Cow smell, and dust smell, and probably some scent of Philza’s feathers too by this point.

He sat uncomfortably on the couch hugging himself and gripping his arms, tail in his lap and staring at the floorboards. Enderchest meowed loudly at him, and he chuckled quietly, pulling her up off the floor to sit on the couch with him, scratching behind her ears.

“Hey, lady,” he crooned softly.

Something hissed and sizzled on the stove. A chest opened, and the fire crunched and popped with new wood added. Wind whirled past the window, and Max’s body made a quiet thud as he plopped down on the floor.

Technoblade sat next to Ranboo on the couch, and held out his cape. Ranboo dropped his weight to Technoblade’s side gratefully, Enderchest meowing at the sudden movement.

“You good?”

“I... don’t like bathing. It hurts my hands.”

“Right,” Technoblade mused, a small frown visible beneath his mask. “Is there a way to avoid that at all?”

Ranboo shook his head. “Maybe if I used gloves? But those aren’t, uh, very good for, maneuverability?”

“Mmn. How *do* you even bathe? I don’t know if I ever asked you that.”

“Um,” Ranboo fiddled nervously with Enderchest’s scruff. “I have to—so, water burns me.”

“Right.”

“But, it’s, um. If there’s only a little water, it only burns a little bit? So, like, if I take a washcloth and put it by the fire so it’s *mostly* dry, it only kind of hurts when I touch it. Like, like holding your hand near the stove. So, I can use it to clean off most of my body, but, since I have to use my hands to do that, it...”

Hence the cactus paste. Fortunately, Ranboo knew they still had some of that. He'd be needing it, apparently.

"Okay. Does wringing it out not get it dry enough?"

"I can't, um, touch it, when it's wet, in order to do the wringing."

"Right. I knew that. I am very smart, and was totally aware of that. Chat don't mock me. Do not mock me. I was just testing Ranboo, Chat, you gotta believe me."

Ranboo giggled. Technoblade gave his arm a squeeze.

"But okay. And you said gloves weren't going to cut it?"

"Yeah..."

"Would it help if Phil or I washed your back for you, metaphorically but also literally?"

Ranboo looked up at him, Enderchest kneading pointy biscuits into Ranboo's thigh, and canted his head.

"Um, what do you mean?"

"I know you're uh...," Technoblade waved vaguely, "more bodyshy than we are, but if you wanted us to help you out with this, we could."

Ranboo considered that. He. Trusted, Technoblade and Philza. There were obviously some places Ranboo would want to handle himself: his face, the base of his tail, his crotch, probably his feet. But if Technoblade could wipe him off for the rest of it, that would spare Ranboo's hands the majority of the burning.

"And that, wouldn't be weird?" Ranboo asked hesitantly.

"Phil and I have been to public bathhouses before," Technoblade said with a shrug. "We also 'know' a guy who strips at the drop of a hat cause he thinks it's funny. I guarantee you're not gonna be the weirdest thing either of us have ever seen."

Ranboo snorted. Public bathhouses. Right. Because ultimately he just... had a body. And everyone had a body. And *most* people were much more casual with theirs than he was with his. He'd seen village women breastfeed their babes and the short tunics or dresses of other slaves and he'd seen shirtless feats of strength and Technoblade and Philza's own bodies. *He* was the guy with the hangups, here, and Technoblade was offering because *he* wasn't awkward and stilted about it.

Probably.

Admittedly, Technoblade did not sound entirely *excited* about the idea, and had spoken of the stripper guy with some amount of audible disdain, but Ranboo figured helping your weird roommate bathe because he couldn't do it himself without burning his hands wasn't top of the list of things Technoblade got enthusiastic about.

"Okay," he said quietly. "Thank you, I'd appreciate it."

"Yeah. Just don't want you getting unnecessarily hurt."

Ranboo hummed, warmed by his words, and scritchd lightly along Enderchest's spine.

Dinner was a quiet affair, and Philza spent the dark hours before bed seated at the crafting table, constructing... whatever it was, he'd need for his house. Probably a bed. His own furniture. Ranboo wasn't looking. He was curled up on the couch with a book and—yeah, okay, he was sulking. He was sulking, but at least it wasn't immediately obvious, because Technoblade was seated on the couch with him, reading a book of his own.

Philza finally stretched his back with three loud pops, and stood, shaking out his wings.

“Okay, I think I'm going to turn in.” He paused to yawn. “We'll all wash up tomorrow; run the sheets through the laundry while we're at it.”

Ranboo and Technoblade both made vaguely affirming noises, and both watched Philza climb up the ladder. Hm.

They shared a brief look, then followed up after him.

Oh, right, his nightclothes, he'd need those.

“You two good?”

“Fine,” Technoblade said stiffly. Ranboo just nodded, eyes going to the floor.

Philza squinted, looking between the two.

They were at an impasse.

Technoblade finally sighed. “Well, goodnight.”

“Techno I can't help but feel that I'm missing something—wait.” Philza unfastened the clasps on his wing coverings, and squinted at the two of them. “Wait, wait. Do you think I'm going to go sleep in my house?”

Technoblade and Ranboo both just stared a moment. *Wasn't he???*

“Uh. Yes?”

“I can't believe you two.” Philza facepalmed, then laughed. “Mate, I *told* you I wasn't looking to change our routine! Ranboo's forgetful but you don't have any excuse!”

“Heh!?”

“Techno, Techno I'm staying right here.”

“Well how was I supposed to know that?!”

Philza laughed, disbelieving and loud, and pulled them into another group hug, Technoblade grumbling all the while and Ranboo feeling mostly just relieved.

“You're both wrecks,” Philza said affectionately. “Sorry I wasn't more clear.”

“It’s fine,” Technoblade grouched, and Ranboo was so wrapped up in his relief that Philza wasn’t moving out all the way that he practically forgot about the impending visit with Captain Puffy.

Y’know. Until the next morning, when Technoblade showered and pulled his wet hair back into a ponytail, and Philza took the bathroom after him. And the implication hovered that Ranboo would be next.

And so that was how Ranboo found himself, sometime later, sitting on the wood of the main floor, Technoblade setting a bowl of warm water near the fireplace and wringing a rag out as hard as he possibly could.

“It, yeah, ideally, should have *barely* any water left in it,” Ranboo said nervously, keeping himself angled so there was no threat of his tail knocking the bowl over.

“And you’re sure it’s chill if I just hang around?” Philza confirmed, and Ranboo nodded. If it was just him and Technoblade Ranboo was certain it’d feel... personal. Suffocatingly so. If Philza was here, Ranboo could convince himself it was halfway normal, like a bathhouse.

It was what he kept telling himself. Like a bathhouse. Like a bathhouse.

Nervously, he unbuttoned his dark purple shirt and slipped it off, exposing his beige tanktop and the freckling along his shoulders. And the scarring along his shoulders. He took off the tanktop next, not wanting to drag this out (he wasn’t nervous, it was just like a bathhouse, he *trusted* them).

Technoblade hissed in a breath, making Ranboo freeze.

Warm fingers touched Ranboo’s back, touch half-distant and faded due to all the scarring, and Philza rounded behind Ranboo with a concerned frown. Ranboo heard him gasp as well.

“Holy *shit*,” Philza breathed, horrified, and Ranboo’s tail curled into his lap. What—

“I’ll kill them,” Technoblade said, low, his words somehow more *solid* than what Ranboo had heard before, and he didn’t have time to question *that* frightening statement before Technoblade’s hands were around his waist, pulling him in, hugging him from behind.

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BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GO

**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD
OR THE BLOOD GOD**

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

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BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD

Ranboo blinked.

The sound, stopped.

He wasn't... he wasn't gonna question what he just heard. He was going to lay his arms on top of Technoblade's and lean back into the warmth of the man holding him, Technoblade's forehead to Ranboo's shoulder and their bodies curving from the pressure. He twisted his head, tail slipping out of his lap and falling bonelessly to the wooden floor, but he couldn't see anything.

“...Technoblade?” Ranboo asked, voice small, quiet. He turned his head the other way, catching sight of half of Philza’s pinched face. “Philza?”

“We... might need to tweak our plans regarding the upcoming trip,” Philza said cryptically.

“Forget the trip, I’ll kill them now,” Technoblade growled, voice *low* and it made Ranboo’s fur stand on end, for all he didn’t... didn’t actually feel *threatened* by it. He whined briefly when Technoblade released him and stood, looking after him anxiously, but Philza stopped Technoblade from going too far.

“Mate,” he said sharply, gripping Technoblade by the hair and pulling him into a stoop so Philza could press their foreheads together, hand clasped over the back of Technoblade’s neck. “Hush. Chat, I know you’re yelling, chill out for a second. There’ll be time for that *later*.” Philza’s voice dropped in volume, and Ranboo felt the need to turn away, like he was intruding. Like a bathhouse. *Like a bathhouse*. “We’ll kill them. We’ll kill every last one of them. But we gotta plan this shit. You like planning, right mate?”

Technoblade took a laborious breath, and Ranboo glanced back at them. Technoblade had Philza’s wrist in one hand, thumbing lightly at his pulse point, and seemed to... deflate.

“Right. Plans, then carnage.”

Philza chuckled. “Carnage indeed.”

Ranboo looked furtively between the two, then shivered minutely and ran a hand up and down his white arm. All his freckles were visible, like this, and he couldn’t help but feel very, very exposed.

“But, for now,” Technoblade breathed, and knelt back down next to Ranboo. He caressed his hair, and Ranboo leaned into the touch, confusion and general unease soothed by the familiar warmth of his palm. “Cleaning you up.”

“Mm.”

“Sorry if I frightened you.”

“I... didn’t, um.” Ranboo tugged at his fingers. “I guess I just don’t understand?”

“We’ll talk about it a little more once Techno and I have had the chance to calm down. Right now, everything’s fine.”

“O...kay?”

Technoblade’s palm settled, warm and heavy, against Ranboo’s back, and Ranboo’s skin crawled and twitched. That was. Hoo boy. That was direct skin contact. Okay.

“I’m just upset you were treated like this.”

“Like... this?”

“The scarring.”

“Oh.”

Part of him wanted to reassure them, tell them he’d deserved it.

The other part acknowledged that they probably wouldn’t find that very reassuring.

“I—my master wasn’t fond of. Failure. O-or my panicking.”

Ranboo was pulled into another hug, one he allowed himself to melt into. He nuzzled up against Technoblade’s jaw, tail swishing in a long, slow arc, and hugged back.

“I’m—really grateful, that you rescued me,” he said, trying to make his thoughts, himself, known. “I, for me, living here has been—” He couldn’t find a word, couldn’t think of it at all. How to encompass everything, *everything*, that they’d done for him, given him, how they’d made his life so incredibly, impossibly *changed*?

“I’m grateful,” he repeated, Philza hugging him from behind, wings encasing the three of them, “I am, so thankful. For *everything*. I know you don’t think you’re anything, um, worth mentioning, in the ‘good person’ department, but, really, you, you *saved* me, and—”

His words ran dry, and he just shivered, warm in their arms and eyes tight but not yet stinging. Technoblade shifted, turning his head so Ranboo could bury his face in the crook of his neck again, the three of them pulled impossibly ever-closer, small arms around Ranboo’s waist and a warm palm cupping the back of his head.

This was what he stood to lose. This was the impossibly precious thing that hung in the balance, hinging on if he did good enough, if he did *right*, with the captain. This warmth, this familiarity, his friends, his *home*—he squeezed his eyes shut tighter and bit back bile, shaking for a whole new reason. He clung tighter. He couldn’t bear it. He just would not be able to bear it.

He would have to be *perfect*.

Which meant he would have to be clean.

“The, um, the—” How to say this? “I’m still, um, shirtless,” he mumbled, hoping to imply that he wanted to get this over with.

“Right,” Technoblade acknowledged, Philza letting out a snort and a little laugh that felt *weird* against the exposed skin of Ranboo’s back. They pulled away slowly, Ranboo feeling colder for their absence, and Technoblade took up the washcloth.

Ranboo bit his lip.

“So, I don’t have as much feeling in my back, maybe we start there? J-just so you can, um...”

“Get the hang of it,” Technoblade finished for him, and Ranboo nodded.

A warm palm braced Ranboo’s shoulder as Technoblade settled behind him, and then heat, dangerous and warning, touched his back. His tail thrashed unhappily, ears pinned back, but it’d been *months* since the last time he’d cleaned up, he really needed it, and besides. He trusted Technoblade.

“Um, a little faster, maybe? When you, uh, linger, it, it gets worse.”

“Got it.”

What Ranboo wouldn’t give for the fine, velvety fur of an Enderman so he could just take a dust bath and call it done. Roll around in the sand or something. But he had dumb skin (burnable skin), and dumb hygiene needs.

Ranboo felt his spine and tail prickle as the washcloth hit the back of his neck, hot, dangerous, but Technoblade had the pace fairly okay by then, and then he was on Ranboo’s shoulder, then arm.

“Everything okay so far?”

“M-maybe just a little faster? You can touch the same spot multiple times, just, quicker, please,” Ranboo requested hesitantly, and Technoblade immediately complied. Ranboo relaxed slightly, arm half-limp in Technoblade’s hands. “Thank you.”

“Better?”

“Yes.”

Technoblade had to rinse and wring out the washcloth once more before finishing Ranboo’s top half, and he put on his tanktop and shirt before hesitantly removing his pants. Like a bathhouse. Like a bathhouse. It was just legs, he just had a body, just like everyone else.

Technoblade, to his credit, did not treat Ranboo like he was vulnerable and exposed. Technoblade just set to washing, avoiding Ranboo’s feet like he’d requested. Like a bathhouse.

He took the damp rag into his inventory when Technoblade had finished with his tail, then went upstairs and shut the bathroom door, stripping out of his underwear to take care of his face, privates, and feet.

On the other side of the door, Jjjjjjeffery and Enderpearl tussled, yowling and hissing in their wrestling, and Ranboo noted just how *thin* the door was. Nothing like the thick barriers against the outside, just about every sound managed to slip its way past this one.

Ranboo flexed his hands when he was finished, the washcloth stowed back in his inventory and his body nice and clean. His palms smarted, but didn’t *hurt*. As awkward as he’d felt the whole ordeal, he couldn’t deny that it had totally, absolutely been worth it to accept help. He opened the door and saw Enderchest sitting blithely atop her son, Jjjjjjeffery looking none too happy to be pinned down, and Enderpearl perched up on top of one of the bookshelves looking smug.

“Hey lady, you break up the fight?” Ranboo asked quietly, sitting on his haunches so he could scritch at her cheek. She meowed at him, but did not conduct any walkabouts just then.

“It’s going to be weird, leaving you all alone. Not just for a couple days, but like, probably a week. Or more. Yeah, probably definitely more, since we’re going to the Badlands first.” He checked his memory book. “Yeah, yeah, that first, then therapy, then the trip home. Multiple weeks. You’re going to be all on your own again, even if you have your kittens. It’ll be. Weird, yeah, I think I already said that, but it will! I’ve seen you basically every day ever since I found you and now I won’t. Even if. Even if I have to, and I know I have to. It’ll be. It’ll be a good thing, I hope.”

Ranboo felt, once again, the anxious twist of bile in his stomach.

“Or something terrible will happen to me, and I’ll never see you again.” His hand shook, and he took a deep breath. “But, probably not?”

He sighed.

“I have to believe it’ll be a good thing, or else I’m probably going to drive myself insane. Which, maybe Captain Puffy could also fix. I don’t know. I probably should give her the smallest number of problems to fix that I possibly can.”

Ranboo tried to smile. “And maybe she’ll fix my memory while she’s at it. That’d be nice.”

He bent low to kiss her little forehead, getting a scolding for the *offense*, and descended the ladder.

“Thank you,” he told them (well, mostly Technoblade). “My hands feel fine.”

“That’s good,” Philza said warmly, and Ranboo’s ears perked up at his tone.

But wait, was wanting to be told he was good... slave-like? Was that allowed? He knew slaves were meant to seek their masters’ approval but couldn’t friends want it too?

His brain wasn’t built for this. Except it had to be, he wasn’t allowed to be a stupid slave anymore. If he was too stupid to think his way through complicated topics then he was too broken, too burdensome, breaking the rules Philza and Technoblade had set for his continued stay, he had to be good. He *had* to.

Or. Maybe less, ‘be good,’ and more, ‘be free.’ Which.

He sat on the floor and pressed his face to Max’s fur, hiding his expression from them. And maybe he’d smell a little bit like dog, but Captain Puffy was a sea captain, right? She was probably used to ocean smells. He just. Needed to not be perceived. Just for a little bit.

He’d gotten used to not feeling like this. Gotten spoiled. His ego had gotten too big and now he was being put back in his place.

And then, of course, came the promised conversation. He was allowed to stay on the floor, chin propped on Max’s shoulder, hands twined in his thick fur. Technoblade and Philza sat on the couch, elbows braced on their knees.

“So, we informed you when you got here that we’re,” Philza gestured between himself and Technoblade, “violent.”

“And criminals.”

“Unsavory sorts.”

“And wanted by the state!” Technoblade finished brightly.

“Right. And that sometimes includes killing people.”

“Right...” Ranboo hedged, wondering where this was going. Ideally not another Enderman’s death. Except, that wouldn’t even make sense, Philza was *wearing* the cozies.

Philza lifted up and pointed his pressed palms towards Ranboo. “You remember your old owner?”

“Uh.” Cold, cruel hands. Raised voices. Desperate expectations Ranboo could not, no matter how hard he tried, ever meet. “Vaguely.”

“We’re going to kill him,” Technoblade stated, and Ranboo blinked. “Him and all of his.”

“It’s going to be a bloodbath.”

“Oh.” Ranboo... didn’t actually have all that many feelings about that? Huh. He... he guessed he should have some sort of emotional reaction. Except. He just.

Didn't.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

Ranboo shrugged helplessly. "Okay."

"Sweet!" Technoblade chimed happily. "Now: tell us everything you know about him and his estate."

"Uhhhh."

Ranboo pulled out his memory book.

"Or even just the city he lived in, the people around him; we need information, Ranboo."

"I, uh, you're, kind of asking the wrong person, for that," he said nervously.

"Anything at all that you can remember, it might help," Philza added on, a little gentler, and Ranboo searched.

"There's a wall to the east," Ranboo said, remembering long morning shadows at the prompting of a passage about keeping to the cool shade when the weather had been unbearable. "The punishment room—" his breath hitched on the word, "—was the only cell on his estate."

"We met there."

Ranboo smiled, nerves settling at the warmth that sentence spurred. "We did."

He took a deep breath.

"Big laundry was done in an expensive redstone machine, but smaller stuff had to be washed by hand. There were. Uh. Three? Floors? Maybe, maybe more, I can't..." He couldn't remember. "Oh! There was a little calico cat named Carnation I used to sneak scraps, she'd hang around the estate every now and then." Ranboo smiled at the page, touched the ink. He hoped she was okay. He hoped she'd found someone else to love her.

"Um. There was, a mineshaft, not far from the estate. I worked there pretty often, I think? I couldn't work most of the cleaning chores, since those took water, so other slaves and servants would take those. Um. I think... I *think* there was an area of the house for servants, and then slaves were in the basement near the kitchen?" That seemed right. "And then Master and his guests would enjoy the main portions."

Ranboo flipped through pages, skimming, and frowned. "I'm sorry. I really don't know."

Technoblade's palm settled on Ranboo's head, Max sniffing excitedly and licking the pinkish skin.

"Alright."

"Alright?"

“Alright. Entirely unrelated—” Technoblade stood up, “—I’m going to go make a phone call that Ranboo isn’t allowed to listen in on.”

Philza laughed, wings flapping minutely with his shaking shoulders.

Ranboo watched Technoblade leave through the front door, and heard the door to Philza’s house open and shut shortly after.

He looked down at Max, who looked like he understood just about as much as Ranboo did, but was less bothered by it than he was.

“Your hair is getting kind of long,” Philza remarked, and Ranboo leaned into his touch when Philza twirled a lock of Ranboo’s hair around his finger, right at the nape of his neck. Philza chuckled and sank his whole hand in, ruffling it fondly. “Would you want to trim it at all?”

Ranboo blinked, and pondered that.

He thought on Technoblade’s long waterfall of hair, glanced at Philza’s own hair, which brushed merrily against his shoulders before flipping out with the strangest naturally occurring curl Ranboo could remember seeing. He reached up and tugged on a lock of his own, feeling how it just barely missed his shoulders, the pleasant brush of its tips against his neck.

“I... think I like it longer,” Ranboo said, leaning away from Max and pressing his weight to Philza’s legs, resting his head against Philza’s knee.

Wait. He tensed. Was this wrong? Was this bad? Was he not supposed to do this? He’d done it so instinctively, a slave at the feet of his master he adored, but that was wrong. That was wrong. He couldn’t do this sort of thing, not now, not *now* of all times, not when he needed to prepare himself to be *perfect*. Stiffly, he pushed himself back up to sitting on his own, and chirped when Philza’s fingers started carding through his hair.

When Technoblade came back, he did not mention the call he’d made, simply touched a hand to the top of Ranboo’s head and took Max out to do his business.

Philza had them help construct a bridge between his porch and Technoblade’s, Ranboo making a happy little trill at how nice it looked. It also... okay, embarrassingly enough, it helped soothe Ranboo’s lingering nerves about Philza making his own house.

Like this, it was clear as day that the two buildings were connected, an extension of each other, practically the same.

His other nerves were not so easily soothed.

Not even a little, actually!

In fact, the night before they were due to depart for the Badlands, Ranboo couldn’t sleep *at all*.

He slipped silently from between Technoblade and Philza, heart doing a weird little flippy thing when he saw Technoblade blindly, wakelessly reach for his companion and draw him in closer.

Last time Ranboo had gotten up in the middle of the night, he’d been sleepwalking, and Chat had woken Technoblade up and sent him after him. Ranboo didn’t want that to happen this time, but also... didn’t know how to communicate that without waking either of the men up.

I'm fine, I'm awake, he mouthed at Technoblade's slumbering form, and hoped that was enough to convince the voices not to rouse him.

He crept down the ladder and into his room, sitting on the floor and picking up one of his blocks. Mmm. Mm. His tail wagged and he sighed.

Captain Puffy. Leaving tomorrow. Everything hanging in the balance.

His tail stopped wagging.

He sighed.

He set the block down. Maybe. Maybe he'd go get another one. Just to do it, just to feel that hum behind his diaphragm and see his hands sink low into the frozen dirt. Yeah, that'd be nice.

He slipped his coat on and closed the door silently behind himself, breath misting in the night air beneath their porch lantern. He shivered, his whole body vibrating up from his toes like a cartoon character, and shook his head as he burrowed down into the neckline of his coat. Cold!

He wandered out towards the barn, Ranmoo and Bob already placed in town with the kindly butcher, but Ranbun would still be around. Probably not awake, but around. Maybe he could poke at them. Did bunny ears twitch like cats' did, when they slept?

A calling-vwoop sounded and Ranboo's head snapped up, ears upright.

"Eidvyrt!"

"Ranboo. It pleases me to see you. Why are you awake so long past the sun?"

"I am," Ranboo frowned, slowing from his run to meet her and sharing her extended block without thinking about it, **"fear-agitated. I am also relieved to see you. My non-Endermen and I are leaving at dawn, and will not return for many days."**

"This is the thing that frightens you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It is important. I (intensifier)-need to do well, or I will lose," Ranboo gnawed at his lip, trying to find the words, **"the approval of my non-Endermen, and they will leave me to the instruction of a different mentor-caretaker."**

"This is some non-Endermen right of passage?"

"No—wait, maybe?" Ranboo made a frustrated noise. **"I do not know how to say it in Voidspeak. My non-Endermen have been helping me. If I have not been successfully helped, someone else will have to—"** what was the word for "fix," Ranboo knew there *had* to be a word for fix, he just, hhhhh, **"—I will have to acquire help from someone else. This trip will determine if I have done well enough or not."**

"Will you come back from this trip?"

“I do not know. I hope so.” Ranboo dug his claws into the dirt miserably, ears pinned down. **“I want to.”**

“Then you will.” Eidvyrt placed her long hand on Ranboo’s head, patting down exactly once.

“You are young, but you are also clever, and good, and curious. You will not be entrusted to any other caretaker.” Eidvyrt examined him briefly, then patted him on the head twice more. **“We will see each other again.”**

Ranboo could not aptly describe how much comfort her simple, straightforward words gave him.

“You can not know that for certain,” he mumbled, hedging a half step closer to her, pressing his brow very lightly against her velvety chest.

“Nothing is known for certain. And even still, I state this as fact.”

“Thank you.” Ranboo dug his claws into the block. Then his ears flared up, his tail poofing. **“Oh! Eidvyrt! Eidvyrt, a good thing has happened! Watch me, watch me!”**

Eidvyrt’s tail wagged in mirror of his, not as fast but sharing in his sudden enthusiasm, and he released her grass block to crouch down, nervous hands pressed to his abdomen. Then he slipped his hands into the earth, and pulled forth a grass block. He glanced up at her, ears hopefully perked, tail hovering in anticipation of her reaction.

“Praise! Praise, little (endearment) Ranboo! Praise, praise, praise!”

“I can do it! I can!”

“You can! Praise!”

Ranboo’s tail wagged so hard his crouched body swayed with it, and he extended the block to her, urging her to place her own hands on it, her long and tapered fingers sinking divots into the dirt.

“Praise for your success!” She nudged her head against Ranboo’s own, their eyes closed and the gentle thunk of their foreheads touching prompting Ranboo to warble-trill in a frankly ridiculous puddle of happiness.

Their tails wagging, Eidvyrt stood off her haunches and pulled on the block, helping Ranboo to his feet as she did. She then released the block, only to pull him into a hug, her chin resting atop his head, the grass block pinned between them.

“Your actions bring me joy. I am pleased to see you have the capability to lift (from embedment). I had assumed you were too non-Endermen, and am pleased to see you are simply late to develop.”

“Me too! I always thought the same!” Ranboo hugged the block delightedly, face pressed against her short fur. Thoughtlessly, he rubbed his face against her, the velvet texture making him vwoop quietly.

“Were you teleported only recently?”

“Yes. I threw the Pearl, like you instructed (guidance).”

Eidvyrt straightened briefly, then canted her head to the side. **"Yes, I suppose that would work as well. Most Enderchildren link hands with their parent-caretakers and are teleported when they are old enough to begin their capabilities."**

Ranboo blinked, tail held suspended and his fingers digging reflexively into the block. The vibrating, bright-light-so-much feeling he'd had, when he'd touched the void, when he'd touched The End. That must've been his capabilities unlocking. Probably. Who could really say for sure!? The important thing was that he could pick up grass blocks with his bare hands.

Ranboo vwooped quietly at Eidvyrt. **"Thank you for teaching me about our people and our culture and our history. I am grateful for your mentor-caretaking. I am grateful for the knowledge."**

Eidvyrt vwooped happily back. **"You are curious and clever. You are a pleasant young Pearl to teach. You are also tired, and you should sleep."**

Ranboo's lips parted slightly, but found that she was right. He *was* tired.

"Okay."

Ranboo was not entirely certain he would ever get used to the way Endermen just... *didn't* have parting phrases. Or even really parting gestures, beyond a friendly flick of the tail. Eidvyrt picked her own block back up, turned, and left, no doubt expecting Ranboo to do exactly the same, and Ranboo wished he could give her a "good night" or even a "bye" that wouldn't come out horribly awkward when translated. It left him feeling... unmoored, almost. Like he was waiting in expectation of something that wasn't going to come. Like he'd missed the bottom stair.

He went inside. He approached the ladder, only to realize his hands were full and he couldn't climb, because he was still holding his block. He crossed to his room, set the block down, marked a sign for it, updated his memory book, and *then* climbed the ladder.

Technoblade and Philza were bundled up in each other's arms, asleep and immobile, and Ranboo pressed his lips together. Yeah, he wasn't fitting back in where he'd been.

That was okay, though. He was allowed in the bed, and that was the part that actually mattered, so he climbed into the slim space behind Philza and wrapped his arms around the short man, careful with his wings.

His stomach churned, anxiety for tomorrow ever-present.

But he was soothed enough to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Image ID: A mostly-blank space with faded grey "Blood for the Blood God" text written in all caps, starting very faded and sparse and then growing darker and more clustered together near the bottom, with one single, stark black "Blood for the Blood God" in the center of the lower mass.

Alright so on account of me moving, the update schedule is now hanging entirely in suspended animation. Will you get an update next Sunday? Maybe! The Sunday after? Who knows! Not me! I'll see y'all when next I see you, which ideally shouldn't be toooooo long from now.

As ever, your comments delight me <3

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

My beta was busy this week so if you see errors feel free to let me know <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I don’t want to,” Ranboo said quietly, furtively, secretly, a whispered plea.

Enderchest meowed in his arms, wriggling for him to let her go, but he didn’t want to, not right now, just this once. Just this once he was going to be selfish and mean and hold her to his chest against her will, just this once he was going to ignore her clearly expressed desires.

“I don’t want to go, I don’t want to do therapy, I don’t want any of this,” he confessed, a sinner knelt on marble before water bathed most holy.

Finally, Enderchest had had enough, and he was forced to release her, her lithe little body springing away and crouching on a tall shelf they’d screwed up near the ceiling. She scolded him once more, and he stared up at her forlornly.

A gentle knock sounded from the door, breaking him from his absent thoughts.

“Ranboo,” Philza said from behind him, and his tail fwipped, but he didn’t turn around. Not just yet. “Ranboo, time to go.”

“Yessir,” he said, feeling pouty, and forced himself to his feet. He gave Enderchest a final pat on the head goodbye, earning a loud scream for his efforts, and glanced around his collection of grass blocks like it was the last time he’d ever see them. For all he knew, it might be.

“We’ll be back before you know it,” Philza reassured him, and Ranboo wished he could feel so confident. Still, it was nice to know Philza believed in him. “And call me Phil.”

“Still not going to do that,” Ranboo mumbled, fastening his coat up to his neck. Philza chuckled fondly, and Ranboo’s tail swished at the bright noise, for all his face remained firmly in a drawn line. He twisted up his scarf around his chin, hiding half his face, and pulled on his gloves.

“We’re gonna be in the Nether in a quick minute, don’t get too cozy,” Philza warned.

Ranboo took off his gloves, and shoved his hands in his coat pockets. His tail curled in near his body, not pulled tight like when he was in acute distress, but certainly not swaying out behind him either. He followed Philza out, hesitating in the threshold and fighting the urge to look back, to mentally say goodbye to every inanimate object he’d gotten used to.

Twitch fluttered down from their perch atop the open stable door, landing on Philza’s shoulder, and let loose a string of kissy noises until Philza indulged them, making their black feathers go all poofy. Max was panting and wagging, displacing the snow with his tail where he sat at Carl’s

hocks. Carl, being the only other sensible living creature in the area, seemed equally if not *more* displeased about all this nonsense than Ranboo was.

“You will be fine,” Technoblade scolded mildly, keeping Carl’s reins tight in hand when he tried to rear up and shake him off. Ranboo mused that he would also be cranky if he was woken up early and had a bunch of stuff strapped to his back. As things stood, he felt like a sulking adolescent. Which. He guessed. He was.

So that was a fun and zesty little experience to add to the list of things he’d experienced.

Unbidden, a memory of coarse rope around his wrists and being dragged somewhere terrible came to mind. He couldn’t remember any specifics, but as Technoblade urged their little group forward, Ranboo couldn’t help but feel like the memory had enough connections to his current situation to warrant prompting.

He kept that to himself, though. After all, he *knew* that Philza and Technoblade wouldn’t drag him and hurt him and sell him to someone who would do more of the same. Worst case scenario here was that they left him with someone they’d deemed responsible and very-likely kind.

That was still an *awful* scenario, but still a step up from what he’d faced before Technoblade had rescued him.

Silver linings.

The portal to the Nether stood, stoic and ominous, as they crested the hill. Ranboo stared at it with thin lips, his eyes shadowed and his face drawn. He. He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to *so badly*.

“Ranboo?” Technoblade asked, he and Philza coming to a pause just before the portal, noticing that Ranboo had fallen behind. That Ranboo had stopped in his tracks.

Months ago, he would’ve balked at the very idea of what came out of his mouth next. But that morning, unhappy and reluctant, he whined, “Are you sure we *have* to?”

Technoblade sighed, Philza letting out a rush of air that trailed into a small chuckle, and Technoblade handed Carl’s reins to him before returning to where Ranboo stood, hands fists in his pockets, eyes cast on the ground.

“Ranboo, hey.”

Ranboo’s shoulders hunched, his face pinching further, and he did not look up at Technoblade.

“Can you tell me what, specifically, is prompting this?”

Ranboo clenched his hands somehow tighter.

“...Everything?”

Technoblade snorted. “Yeah, okay, I get that. But is there something that can be done actively right now that’ll help? Can you identify a precise issue?”

Ranboo hesitantly leaned forward, and Technoblade’s hand on the back of his neck pulled him in against the fur of his cape.

“...I liked things the way they’ve been,” he said quietly, slowly, voice pitched low. “I don’t want them to change.”

Technoblade let out another breath, a steaming cloud tickling Ranboo’s ear in the cold morning air.

“And I get that, I promise I do. But it’s not going to be the end of the world.”

Again, if only Ranboo could be that confident. It *was* nice that Technoblade also seemed to have some measure of faith in him.

“How long, again, do you, did you think,” how long to reach the verdict, how long did he have to prove himself, how long before he *knew*?

“Maybe a week, probably less, in the Badlands, then probably between one week and three in the Central Kingdom. Phil and I will be gone for... one or two of those weeks. Depending.”

So a month, ish. An intolerably long amount of time for him to hang, suspended, not knowing, never knowing, but maybe, maybe, maybe enough time to prove himself. He just would have to not fuck up, at all, that whole month-ish, and if he could be *perfect* for a month he could go home. Home to his **mentor-caretaker**, home to his cats, home to his cows and his rabbit and the warm bed big enough for three and the hearths and the familiar snowy landscape and *he didn’t want to go!*

He pressed his face against the fur at Technoblade’s neck, feeling a traitorous little wobble in his chin.

“You’re gonna be okay,” Technoblade said, then pulled Ranboo away and cupped his cheeks, not forcing eye contact but grasping Ranboo’s attention. “You’re *fine*, I know it’s a lot, and a long time, but then it’ll be over and things will go back to normal and *ideally* we’ll all be better off for it.”

Technoblade... really did seem convinced that Ranboo wouldn’t have to stay behind, when he and Philza eventually returned home. He spoke like it was a forgone conclusion that Ranboo would come back with them, like he didn’t have any doubt. Did that mean Ranboo had been doing good? That he’d done good *enough*? He knew he wasn’t totally fixed yet, but was he on the right track, that Technoblade and Philza were just doing this to cover their bases, not because they thought Ranboo might actually need to be left with someone else?

They had, at the start. Had Ranboo convinced them?

“I’m, good?”

He cringed. What a stupid, needy thing to ask.

“It’s okay if you need an extra minute,” Technoblade said, head tilted and warm thumb stroking at Ranboo’s cheekbone.

Ranboo shook his head.

“We’re good to go,” Technoblade called back to Philza, releasing Ranboo and turning towards the portal, this time with Ranboo close on his heels. Philza tossed his coat over Carl’s laden saddle before hopping through the purple sheet, and Ranboo braced himself before stepping in, Technoblade gesturing for him to go before him.

The dizzy nausea of the portal was not *quite* as bad as Ranboo expected it to be. Was he misremembering? Probably.

The Nether was about as hot and godawful as he remembered, though, that matched up with the vague recollections that were brought to mind. Absolutely miserable. He was fortunate that whatever magic allowed for storage in an inventory also kept the items inside at the same temperature they were at when they were itemized. Otherwise his milk would surely curdle within moments.

Hm. Actually. That was probably why Philza had insisted he bring the lemonade in his inventory. Ranboo should thank him for that.

“Okay,” Philza grunted, loosening his haori, “Ranboo, I’m sorry, but you’re just gonna have to deal with my eyespots for a bit. Shit’s way too fucking hot in here, and as long as we’re clear of warped forests we’re not gonna encounter any Endermen anyway.”

Ranboo nodded, glancing to the side as Philza pulled off the wing cozies Technoblade had helped him into not even an hour before. “I understand,” he said, then jumped a whole foot in the air when a flying floating *horrifying* white giant *thing* shrieked.

Ah. That was. Fire.

Oh! That was! Technoblade. With his sword. Returning the. Fire. Which hit the white giant. And it died.

Ranboo! Hated! The! Nether!

Eidvyr was right Eidvyr was so right why would any sane Endermen willingly teleport here this place was a fucking nightmare!!!

Why was *he* here?!? He hated this. Why did Technoblade and Philza want to travel this way? Surely the time lost was made up for the *not dying*!!!

He heard something—someone?—grunt, and gripped Technoblade’s cape anxiously.

“Ranboo. Your coat,” Technoblade prompted, and oh yeah. Not dying of heat. That was also probably important. He set his coat and scarf over Carl’s back and took a deep breath, smokey air stinging his throat.

Ranboo blinked as Technoblade traded out his familiar, comfortable furred cape for a lightweight cotton mimic, thin red cloth with no fur clasped in the front with golden discs connected by a chain. That. Made sense, actually, that he would have multiple capes. Did Ranboo know that? Ranboo might have known that. He couldn’t remember (and he *wasn’t* bringing his memory book out in this place. Whatever happened in the Nether, he either remembered it on the other side or it stayed in the Nether).

The journey did not take all day, but it wasn’t exactly a quick stroll either. Ranboo’s primary job was to follow along closely, and hold Carl while Philza bridged out over massive lakes of lava and Technoblade mined out harsh, red blocks for him to do it with. Ranboo watched this with anxiety that was only partially mitigated by the fact that Philza could fly, if he fell.

He held onto Technoblade's hand *very hard* when he and Carl actually crossed the bridges themselves, certain death on either side.

They took frequent breaks, Ranboo drinking lemonade and nibbling on melon slices, Philza and Technoblade drinking water and eating more of the same. Technoblade fed Carl melon slices too, the horse eating the seeds, rind, and all. Technoblade didn't let him eat too many rinds, though. Ranboo wondered if it was one of those things where horses could only have them in moderation. They had a lot of water buckets, but even so Ranboo wondered if they'd have enough to get two adults and one horse through the Nether.

Fortunately, only a few hours after the group ate a light lunch, the ground smoothed out with clear signs of the presence of others, and wide, sturdy bridges led to a glowing portal that came into view. Carl knew the telltale glow of an exit, and urged the group forward quickly, ready to be out of the heat.

Upside: the heat on the other side of the portal was not, in fact, as bad as inside the Nether.

Downside: it was still kinda hot though.

A massive mesa sprawled out before the portal, a wooded plateau stretching off to the right, a flat terracotta stretch separating it from a... weirdly eroded area. The wooded area seemed to bear the marks of settlement, and Ranboo wasn't sure but he got the impression that he caught sight of a large building poking out from the treeline.

More immediately, there were rocks and rock formations and boulders and a bright sun high in the sky and lots and lots of scrub brush and sticky plants.

Oh hey. Cactus.

They were making their way towards the wooded area, passing over a shallow creek and rounding a large rock formation, when the sound of laughter carried on the air.

"That's Skeppy; stay down," Technoblade urged, and Ranboo found himself suddenly seated on the ground behind the boulder. "Max: Sit. Stay." Philza muffled a laugh, holding Carl by the reins and positioning him behind another large rock, and Technoblade crouched, walking silently.

He was smiling. No.

He was grinning.

Ranboo blinked owlishly, utterly bamboozled, and watched him sneak his way around rocks and jutting formations, the sound of others growing louder. Chatter. Conversation. More laughter. Technoblade was perched on top of an outcropping, all but his crown and the eyes of his skull mask hidden behind sun-heated rock.

Ranboo couldn't help but curiously glance around his hiding spot. He caught sight of three men: a creeper-hybrid who made Ranboo's tail instinctively puff up at first sight, a human man dressed in bright azure and more diamond jewelry than Ranboo had been *aware* you could get piercings for, and. A. Uh. A uh. Demon.

Or maybe half demon.

Ranboo wasn't gonna get too caught up on specifics.

He was tall and void-black with white eyes and sharp teeth and claws and horns and a pointed tail and he was *scary* and that was what mattered.

"BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!!!"

"SCATTER!" shouted the human, lurching forward and narrowly missing Technoblade who leapt, and landed, and nearly sliced the man in two with his blade. Ranboo yelped, unable to help himself, and skittered back, bumping against Philza's legs. Philza, who was laughing.

"You can't outmaneuver me Skeppy!"

"Yes I can!"

"I have *hooves*, Skeppy!"

"FUCK!"

Philza hooted, one hand over his stomach, and Carl snorted derisively.

"Um. Um. Philza? Um."

"It's alright, Ranboo, it's alright, sorry, we should've warned you. This is how they play."

That did *not* look fun.

"A little warning *would* be nice," came a low, smooth voice, and Ranboo glanced up to see the creeper-hybrid round the boulder to their little hiding spot, sunlight glinting off his golden armor and the trident he held in one hand.

"'Blood for the blood god' *was* the warning, mate," Philza said, extending a hand and shaking with the firm nature of grown men. Ranboo glanced down at his own hand.

"It's good to see you again. Skeppy's been extra obnoxious since you called."

Philza snorted. "I bet. Techno's been excited to see him again, too."

The sound of a heavy collision, followed by a mixed shout of rage and pain, had Ranboo's head whipping back around. Technoblade had the bejeweled human, who Ranboo presumed was the one named Skeppy, down in the dirt, face pressed into the cracked earth and Technoblade's hair askew with a wild look to him. He was grinning.

Then the demon from earlier, maybe a third of Technoblade's width (Ranboo looked thicker than he was, and Ranboo considered himself to be fairly skinny even after months of regular meals), shot out of nowhere like a viper and smacked straight into Technoblade, knocking him off of Skeppy. There was a flash of metal and then Techno was back up on his hooves, blade in hand, and the demon and human were staring him down side by side.

"And. And this is. Normal?" Ranboo asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, I'd say this is pretty average," the creeper hybrid mused, turning to Philza, who hummed a cheerful agreement.

“Ranboo, hey, come say hello. This is Sam; he’s one of our hosts.”

“Hello sir,” Ranboo greeted timidly, getting up off the ground and extending his hand. One ear pinned back in the direction of Technoblade, of the scuffle happening there.

“Hello sir,” Sam returned congenially, shaking Ranboo’s hand with a strange firmness. Ranboo blinked at him.

Ranboo had never been a “sir” in his *life*.

“It’s, um, nice to meet you?” he said, voice pitched high and off-balance.

“You too. Welcome to the Badlands.” He turned to look at the wrestling trio, the redstone in his gas mask clicking on with a faint glow and a whirl of mechanical air. “They’re probably going to be at it for a while. We can go back to the house without them. They’ll catch up.” The redstone clicked off, the fans stopped.

“Fine by me,” Philza said, shrugging, and clicked his tongue at Carl. Twitch cawed “awwww man!” from their perch on Philza’s shoulder, and Max cocked an ear their way when Philza whistled at him, but remained vigilantly staring at Technoblade and the other two.

“He’ll follow them,” Philza said with a shug. Ranboo belatedly realized that it was probably a very good thing that Max was not considering Skeppy and the demon as an actual threat.

“Good boy,” Ranboo said quietly, patting Max on the shoulder, and his tail wagged once but then stilled on the hot earth, snout zeroed in on the trio.

Ranboo trailed close to Philza, one hand resting on Carl’s sweaty flank. Ranboo’s tail twitched when they passed the tree line, the shade of the wooded area pleasant and appreciated.

He took another sip of lemonade, the cool juice sweet in his mouth.

Sam and Philza were talking. Catching up, it seemed. Sam was apparently a redstone mechanic, and had been doing a bit of contract work in a jungle and a desert, and Ranboo wondered if the furry man *liked* the heat.

Well. He wasn’t doing anything in the Nether, at least.

The trees parted to reveal the “house” they were going to, which was really more of a mansion, in Ranboo’s opinion. Not very tall, no, but wide and long, with a steep cliff not far from the southern side that looked over a bright sea port, small but even from a distance Ranboo could see it churning with activity. In a sunbeam in front of the house, a cat hybrid stretched out on a large stone, apparently dozing.

“Ranboo, this is Antfrost,” Sam said, and Antfrost blinked his eyes open, stretched with a yawn, and then slinked off the boulder, landing on his feet. He was barefoot (bare pawed?), with baggy pants that cinched around his calves and a sleeveless, thin turtleneck.

“Hello,” he greeted with a friendly flick of his tail, and Ranboo’s own lifted, copying his.

“Hi mate,” Philza greeted, shaking Antfrost’s hand first, then stepping aside so Ranboo could follow after.

Antfrost had pads on his palm and fingers. If Ranboo wasn't so busy being intimidated, he probably would've found that very cute.

"Hello sir," Ranboo said quietly, not... he wasn't *used* to being treated like part of the conversation. At best, he remembered being treated like a labor animal, given no more attention by his master and his guests than Philza and Antfrost were currently paying to Carl.

(At worst—well).

"Hey boys!" an instantaneously recognizable voice called, and Ranboo jumped.

"Captain!" Philza returned brightly, Twitch lifting off his shoulder to go land on Captain Puffy's offered wrist, who quickly trotted over to their little group. Ranboo hadn't even noticed the steep path down the cliffside, leading from the port.

She was. Much, much, much. Much. *Much* smaller than he'd imagined her. She was... maybe five feet tall? Ish? Potentially. Her cloud of hair was practically as big as she was (and that made Ranboo's neck hurt just looking at her, what kind of muscles...), her hat was propped back thanks to her horns, and her sheep legs had a similar bow to them as Technoblade's, just on a far tinier scale.

The top of her head was below Ranboo's *chest*.

It did not actually make her any less intimidating. If nothing else, now Ranboo was even *more* impressed with her lung capacity. She smiled brightly at their group, sheep ears flopping out on either side of her head, and Ranboo's tail twisted in tight around his legs.

"And you must be Ranboo! Hi!!!"

"Hello, Captain," Ranboo mumbled, trying not to curl in on himself and failing miserably. He was supposed to be acting like a free person, dammit. *This* was the person he needed to impress!

"Wow, you're taller than I thought you'd be!" she observed cheerily, sticking out a hand. Ranboo stooped down and shook it.

"Everyone's taller than you," Antfrost said. Captain Puffy stuck her tongue out at him with a loud "nyeh!" Her hand was *strong*. "Even Philza is taller than you."

"Hey!" Philza shouted in mock-offense, giggling.

"Tiny squad unite!" Captain Puffy cheered, whirling over to Philza and forgoing the handshake to pull him into a hug, lifting him briefly off his feet as he laughed, Twitch cawing and flapping about their heads. To Antfrost's credit, Philza *was* indeed taller than she was.

"Let's get inside, I'm starving," Captain Puffy announced, patting Carl on the side and strolling in like she owned the place.

Maybe she did? Ranboo had no way of knowing.

Ranboo helped Philza stable Carl, the horse looking none too pleased with his situation but calming when Philza put out water and food for him, and the two were rounding back to the front of the mansion when they saw Technoblade and the other two approaching.

He had one arm hooked around Skeppy's shoulders, blood smeared on Skeppy's lip and Technoblade's right ear, and the three of them were laughing, the demon towering over the other two and needing to move away branches as he walked.

"All done?" Philza called as they drew closer, he and Ranboo waiting for their groups to merge and enter the building together.

"Never," Technoblade said happily, and there was a breathless quality that made Ranboo shiver.

"Ohhh, I think we're done for now," the demon countered, his voice a higher pitch than Ranboo had thought. Reedier. But maybe that made sense, given how thin and long he was. Then he stretched, arms lifted high above his head, spine arching forward and tail flicking out, and he looked somehow impossibly taller.

Ranboo wasn't used to looking up at anyone who wasn't an Enderman. And even Endermen didn't get that tall. It was intimidating. As were the sharp fangs. And claws. And horns. And the faintly-glowing halo that was propped up by those horns.

Ranboo distantly wondered if that was an actual legitimate halo, or if it was cheeky decoration. It looked real.

"That's cause you're a bitch ass pans—"

"SKEPPY! LANGUAGE!"

Ranboo jumped, tail poofed and ears pinned back at the sudden shout, and Philza glanced back before unfurling a wing, offering Ranboo a hide. He took it gratefully, gaze kept on the strangers rather than the eyespot that was still visible. Ranboo acknowledged that it made sense; it was too hot for woolen covers. Wasn't it midwinter? Why was it still so warm here?

The demon and Skeppy continued to bicker as the group crossed the threshold into the mansion, and Ranboo blinked at the sharp drop in temperature. Though, he guessed he understood why, given that the interior walls, ceiling, and floor were made entirely out of *solid Nether quartz*.

Ranboo gawped. He couldn't help it. He'd been around rich people before, sure, but this was wealth on another level. Nether quartz was insanely expensive, mostly turned into sculptures and statues and flaunted in the homes and museums of the obscenely rich. Going into the Nether was already something very few people were willing to do. Harvesting quartz was a dangerous and slow task. One solid block was a bragging right. A mansion *lined* with it could only be insanity.

"You are so! Terrible!" the demon proclaimed, shoving his cackling companion.

Or. Or maybe this was just the result of having someone around who potentially didn't find the Nether to be objectively awful. Demons *were* from there. So. Ranboo guessed, if anyone was going to have an "easy" time mining quartz...

Still. It was a feat that meant this guy was just about as intimidating as he looked.

"ANY-WAY!" the demon cut Skeppy's further antagonization off, tail lashing behind him, "We have *guests*! We should try to be good hosts."

“I don’t think anyone expected any better than this, Bad,” Captain Puffy called as she rejoined them, a bowl of—something—in the crook of her arm and a spoon in her hand, Antfrost sauntering with his hands in his pockets behind her. The kitchen, at least, looked like it was tile, from what Ranboo could see, but that might have just been him refusing to believe that someone would line a place of work with *Nether quartz*.

“Well you are a muffinhead and I am going to be a good host in spite of all of you muffinheads conspiring against me.”

“Ooo, conspiring,” Technoblade remarked, “You’ve been expanding your vocabulary.”

“You’re all the worst.” The demon sighed, then faced Philza and Technoblade fully. “Puffy’s in the room you two usually stay in, so we’re gonna put you up in Antfrost’s old room.”

“Anything works for us,” Philza said, setting a single diamond block in the demon’s hands. “Thanks again for hosting us.”

Oh, right. *We’re rich too*, Ranboo remembered belatedly.

“You’re welcome, *Philza*.”

Philza laughed, and Skeppy swiped the diamond block with a cheerful, “Yoink!”

“Skeppy!”

“Hey, I’m hosting too!”

“So actually *do* some hosting!”

“That’s what I’m doing right now,” he said, already branching off down a different hallway. The demon growled, a sound that was actually... not all that threatening. Ranboo was very easily threatened but. That noise was. Hm. More akin to an aggravated child than an. Uh. Than a demon.

Maybe since the rest of him was so fearsome to look at, demons didn’t need to *sound* scary?

“Here,” he said, leading them down a staircase and into a room lit by glowstone. Ah, that made sense, that made sense! Instead of having a tall building, they built it down into the earth, to avoid the sun and heat of the mesa. The room itself was cheerful, for a space with no windows. The bed was a large, ovular mattress that kind of looked like a nest, with lots of pillows and thin sheets in a rainbow of colors. There were a couple pieces of stray furniture, a small water closet, and instead of carpet the floor was covered in blue mats. Ranboo rocked on his heels experimentally, feeling the give of it.

Philza and Technoblade settled their packs into the corner of the room, and Ranboo cautiously explored the space, poking at the glowstone curiously. He jumped back, tail poofed, when it made a sound almost like glass shattering.

“They do that,” the demon said, and Ranboo’s tail thrashed nervously behind him. Act free. *Act free*.

“I’ve, never um. Seen one up close before.”

He laughed, and it was a friendly sound. “Plenty of people haven’t. They’re pretty useful so I collect lots of them.”

“Mm,” Ranboo nodded shyly, tugging on his fingers. Oh, Technoblade and Philza must have gone back upstairs. It was just him and the demon, who hung near the door expectantly, waiting. Ranboo trotted over and nervously tugged at his hair, looking at the floor as their host led him back up the steps. “I don’t, think I ever caught your name, sir?”

“Oh, call me Badboyhalo! Or any nickname you want from that.”

“Oh. That’s. An interesting name.” Ranboo and Badboyhalo reentered the foyer, where Technoblade once again had an arm draped around Skeppy’s neck in a loose approximation of a chokehold, chatting with Antfrost, and Philza seemed to be in idle conversation with Sam and the captain.

“Ahaha, yeah. My actual name isn’t pronounceable for human tongues so they just use the literal translation of my true name.”

“Oh!” Ranboo brightened. “I um, I, also speak, a language, that humans can’t. Maybe I could try yours?”

Badboyhalo shrugged. “I mean, you can try. It’s -... - - -... --- -... - - -... --- in my hometongue.”

Ranboo blinked at the string of clicks and pops Badboyhalo made with his tongue, sounding more squirrel than human. The rapid clicks, even if they *had* been in Ranboo’s capacity to mimic, would’ve been far too fast for him to make sense of, anyway.

Badboyhalo laughed, his tail flicking, and Ranboo’s tail instinctively copied it.

“Yeah. That’s about the same vacant look everyone gives me. I’m curious, now, though. What’s your language sound like? Tell me your name!”

“Oh. Um. **My name is Ranboo.**”

Badboyhalo blinked, his face losing all signs of comprehension.

“Um. I guess. Endermen and demons. Also maybe aren’t all that compatible.”

Badboyhalo snorted, then shrugged with a little nod. “Yeah, I guess so! This was neat, though! I don’t think I’ve ever heard Endermen speak before.”

“They, uh, tend not to talk to non-Endermen. Communication is—pretty difficult, if you’re doing anything more complicated than charades. And—um, well. Yeah.”

Badboyhalo canted his head at Ranboo, and Ranboo felt a nervous shiver pass up his spine. “A-and. A lot of Endermen think trying to talk to non-Endermen is a wasted effort, anyway.”

Badboyhalo snorted. “They think we’re stupid?”

“No! No, just, um. Stubborn? Or, um. Maybe. A little dense?” Badboyhalo laughed lightly, tail flicking, and Ranboo bit his lip. “And. Um. Violent.”

Badboyhalo tilted his head Ranboo's direction in mild acknowledgement. "Okay, that's fair. A lot of our interactions do tend to end up with someone dead."

Ranboo's skin prickled. He wasn't the *best* at reading subtle meanings but he tended to pick up on threats a little easier.

His tail curled around his legs. Technoblade was close. Technoblade would not let their demon host kill him. They probably wouldn't even be staying here if killing Ranboo was going to be an option.

But maybe they hadn't told Badboyhalo *what* Ranboo was? Maybe Ranboo was an unpleasant surprise Badboyhalo felt the need to remind of his place.

Ranboo jumped at the hand on his shoulder. "Hey, sorry. I didn't mean to treat your, uh, fellows, dying so casually. That was stupid of me."

"Oh," Ranboo blinked, his tail unwinding slightly. "Um. It's alright. I know it happens."

"Still. I should know better as a half-demon, and I shouldn't scold Skeppy for not having any tact if I'm gonna walk around putting my foot in my mouth. My bad."

Ranboo swallowed and gave a small nod. Okay, maybe *not* a veiled threat that he was going to kill him, then? Maybe Ranboo was just a little on edge. "It's okay," Ranboo repeated, wishing Technoblade wasn't currently in the midst of yet another scuffle with Skeppy, wanting for the familiar dark of the neck of Technoblade's cape.

But he wasn't even wearing his furred one right now, and Ranboo had no desire to entangle himself with whatever shenanigans were happening over there.

"Soooo," Badboyhalo said awkwardly, and hey, Ranboo could relate to that feeling, "How'd you end up living with those two?"

"Oh, um," Ranboo figured Technoblade and Philza would've told him. Wait, had this happened before? "I was a slave for a man who um. I think had a grudge? Against Technoblade. He rescued me during his escape."

"Oh! That's awful; I'm glad Techno was able to help you."

Ranboo offered him a hesitant, but genuine smile. "I am too." Oh, but if they were making conversation, it was Ranboo's turn to struggle awkwardly for something to say. "Um. How, did you end up meeting the good captain?"

"Oh, she tried to kill us!" Badboyhalo said brightly. "Skeppy and I own a ravager we stole as a pup, which means we kinda look like pillagers from a distance and also when you don't know us. So she got the jump on us." Badboyhalo's tail tip was twitching, perked upright and pointed end whirling about dangerously, but Ranboo's tail couldn't help but flicker in mimicry of it. "We lived, luckily, and so did she, and then we just sort of made mischief together for a little while. Now we're friends."

"Is she, nice?"

"Oh, yeah! I mean, she's a little terrible to us, because we know her, but it's all playful teasing. She's very considerate of the limits of people she interacts with."

Ranboo nodded, gripping at his left elbow.

“You’re going in for therapy, right? If that’s okay to ask.”

“I am,” Ranboo said nervously, the reminder of how much he had at stake doing nothing to settle him. “Do you think she’ll be—um.”

“She’s very helpful,” Badboyhalo assured.

“Okay,” Ranboo tugged at his fingers, staring at her cloud of hair. He looked anxiously to Philza, and wished he was wearing his wing coverings because he had to look away just as quickly.

“She’s a kind woman,” Badboyhalo insisted gently, twisting his head near-owlishly, “I know she comes off as—a lot, but she genuinely wants to help the people she speaks with and do what’s best for them.”

Ranboo glanced up at him and his horns anxiously, then back at her and Philza and Sam, and then down at his feet, tail tip flicking with unspent anxiety.

What if getting sent away was what was “best for” Ranboo?

“Okay,” he repeated. “Um, thank you, for hosting us.”

Badboyhalo smiled brightly, his halo briefly flaring in intensity (subtly enough that Ranboo blinked, wondering if maybe it was just a trick of the light). “We’re happy to! It’s nice to meet new people and spend time with old friends.”

Suddenly, Philza straightened in his conversation with Captain Puffy and Sam, looking first to his right, then left, and catching sight of Ranboo. “Ah, there he is,” Philza called, just loud enough for Ranboo to hear, and he scurried over to Philza’s side. “Sorry mate, I think Techno and I forgot you downstairs for a moment there.”

“It was okay, I was exploring, and then Mister Badboyhalo and I compared languages.”

A snort behind him. “You don’t have to call me ‘mister.’”

“Sorry.”

“You’re so polite,” Captain Puffy crooned, her eyes gone all squinty-smiley and one elbow propped up against Sam’s bicep.

“At least someone around here is,” Badboyhalo griped, doubling over so he could rest his pointy elbows on Captain Puffy’s yellow dangly shoulder pad thingies.

“Hey, *mister* host, when do we eat?”

“You’re eating right now.”

“I’m *snacking* right now, Bad, verbiage is important.”

“Your muffin is important.”

“Okay! Okay! I think that’s a ‘language’ right there.”

“What about that is a language!?”

Everyone here was so... *loud*...

“We can eat though,” Skeppy stated from where he dangled, held like a football, in one of Technoblade’s arms. Ranboo twitched anxiously and shuffled, making room for the rest of them to merge their littler groups into one.

“Thank you Skeppy! You’re being such a good host,” Captain Puffy praised, and even Ranboo could hear how smarmy she sounded.

“I hate! ALL of you! *You muffinheads...*” Badboyhalo complained, and Ranboo side stepped just a little bit closer to Philza. At least Sam and Antfrost seemed vaguely low energy. Or maybe just quieter than their companions. Ranboo jumped when Philza’s hand touched his, skittish and nervous, but he gratefully clutched that offered hand like a lifeline when he realized what it was. Philza gave him a reassuring squeeze and Ranboo felt *pathetically* grateful for the comfort.

Okay, but sitting down, sitting down was good. Sitting down would be nice. Sitting down between Technoblade and Philza was good, that was safe, and Ranboo wouldn’t even stick out super bad because Badboyhalo loomed over *everyone* at the table. He listed towards Technoblade, then half-straightened because he wasn’t being a needy mess in front of Captain Puffy, he *wasn’t*, and he glanced to Philza but flinched and looked away because he was spoiled and stupid and had gotten used to the wing coverings but Philza wasn’t wearing them right now so he hunched in closer to Technoblade again and—

“Oh shit! Forgot to put those back on!” Philza stood back up and Ranboo blinked at him, eyes skittering away from his wings as Philza turned and left.

Technoblade’s arm around Ranboo’s middle made something in Ranboo snap, and he melted in against Technoblade’s side, curling awkwardly so he could hide himself against the bulk of his friend.

“What’s happening?” Captain Puffy asked, and her voice was mild enough Ranboo only felt a small stab of guilt at her words.

“Phil’s got wing coverings to keep Endermen from getting agitated by his eye spots. They’re not exactly sensible Nether attire, so,” Technoblade shrugged, hand rubbing slowly up Ranboo’s arm, and Ranboo bit his lip and stared very intently at the table, sensing people’s eyes on him.

“That makes sense,” Sam mentioned, his gas mask clicking on again with a whirl of fans and glowing redstone. He tapped the gold contraption. “I’ve got mob needs, too.”

Ranboo’s ear that wasn’t pressed to Technoblade’s side perked up. “Oh?” he asked quietly, so that if anyone else spoke at the same time their voice would carry over his.

“You know when you get excited or agitated you start breathing more heavily?” Sam took a deep breath as though to show, his gas mask whirring and glowing faintly as he did. Ranboo stared at it and nodded, pressed up against Technoblade’s side but tail slowly unwinding from where it spiralled around his calf.

“So creepers do as well, but if they oxidize their blood too much, that makes them explode. That’s why they blow up around people and threats—they get scared.”

“Oh,” Ranboo murmured, rapt. He’d never thought about *why* creepers blew up.

“I have to regulate how much oxygen I take in, as a result. I’m only part creeper, but I’ve still got gunpowder in my blood. Even though it won’t kill me I wouldn’t call my veins sizzling ‘fun.’”

“Oh, wow,” Ranboo breathed. The gas mask clicked on again, and Ranboo saw Sam’s eyes go all squinty out of his peripherals. He tentatively returned the smile, tail tip flicking. “I can’t touch water, or it burns me,” Ranboo informed, simply because it seemed like the appropriate response for the conversation.

“That’s pretty sucky.”

“I think, I probably like breathing better.”

Sam laughed, his gas mask whirring, and Ranboo felt Technoblade chuckle against his side. Ranboo glanced over and—oh, right, there were *so many other people* here, and they were watching his and Sam’s exchange, and Ranboo’s ears pinned down and his tail curled into his lap, shrinking just a little closer against Technoblade.

Technoblade’s warm hand left his arm and patted him on the head, ruffling his hair slightly. Ranboo felt the touch soothe him, but then stiffened. Captain Puffy was here. Captain Puffy was the one he *needed* to prove himself to. He couldn’t be a cowering, needy little thing while she was watching. But. But but but, also, if he pulled away, that would count as rejecting Technoblade, and Ranboo—he couldn’t. And he didn’t want to. So. He didn’t.

“Okay, fuckin’ hell I forgot how much of a pain in the ass these are when I’m the one doin’ em myself,” Philza announced as he returned, and Ranboo smiled to see him, and the wing cozies he was wearing. He… he really, really did appreciate it. He knew it was a bother—one that had even interrupted everybody as Philza went and got them on—and Philza didn’t have to, but he was just so grateful that he did anyway.

“Are you sure it’s not just because you’re old?”

“Skeppy!”

But Philza just laughed it off, taking his seat between Sam and Ranboo, and Technoblade said, “You know, we’re not that young anymore ourselves.”

“God, that’s right, I forget you’re like, basically my age.”

“Well *I* am immortal and timeless,” Badboyhalo quipped, his tail flicking behind him.

“And I’m hungry!” Captain Puffy announced.

A round of mild chuckles and tittering laughter rose, and Philza informed the table, “We three ate fairly recently, so we’ll probably just pick at the food while we chat.”

“I’ll just pick on Skeppy.”

“Hey! Get off!” Skeppy whined, suddenly finding Technoblade’s elbow and a good amount of his weight propped up on his significantly shorter head.

“Can’t. Gravity’s increasing.”

“Wooooow, Techno, I can’t believe you’re just draping yourself all over Skeppy like that *right* in front of Bad!” Captain Puffy drawled, passing a large platter of what looked like meat and vegetables to Antfrost.

“Nahhh, nah nah nah nah. Let’s not phrase it like that,” Technoblade chuckled stiffly, sitting back upright, as Badboyhalo dropped his face into his hands and groaned, “You’re the *worst!*”

Food was passed in front of Ranboo after Philza filled a small bowl of meat and greenery, and Ranboo halfheartedly plucked some of the leafier looking plants off the platter, and quickly pawned it off on Technoblade. He did not feel hungry at all, actually. Kind of the opposite. The smell of meat was somewhat nauseating, as it happened.

He nibbled on one of the broad, flat leaves that had been... fried? Sauteed? It was crisp and just a little oily and pleasantly spiced. He was sure he’d appreciate it much, much more if he was alone with Technoblade and Philza in their home with Jjjjjjeffery attempting to snatch it straight out of his mouth.

He missed his cats.

He twitched at a sudden spike in volume, multiple people speaking at once, and he knew he should but he didn’t even attempt to follow the conversation. There were a lot of people, and seemingly all of them had something to say, elbows leaned casually on the table and laughter passed easily between them.

Subtly, Ranboo wiped his fingers on his pants and pulled out his memory book, hidden under the table so Philza and Technoblade were the only people who, theoretically, could see it, but they weren’t looking at him. Ranboo... tried to find... he.

This wasn’t like the lunch and dinner gatherings he’d seen, before. His master’s friends and brown nosers and people he was a brown nose towards. The friendly atmosphere, the broad table, the smell of food, it all... it *almost* evoked a memory, but not quite. It wasn’t the right atmosphere, the right table, the right food, but he felt, just, at the tip of his tongue, at the front of his brain, some memory he couldn’t grasp—

But it was different. He could, he could half-certainly say that. Well. He glanced at Philza’s relaxed, open face, then up at Technoblade’s happy grin as he discussed—something.

Maybe more than half-certainly.

He wrote down the memories he still held onto in the pages, struggling to recall what had happened, that morning. Had anything happened in the Nether? If something had, it stayed in the Nether, he guessed. He wrote the names of the people he’d met, the interesting details about creepers and being a creeper hybrid Sam had shared with him, that Badboyhalo said Captain Puffy was nice and they’d traded their hometongues with each other. He wrote that Skeppy and Technoblade were rowdy friends and Antfrost was fairly quiet, all told. He tried to remember anything else, but his mind was hazy with stress and tension. He put his book away.

Ranboo nibbled on another leaf. He nearly choked as he jumped; he felt his ears pin back and his eyes squeeze closed at a sudden bout of shouting, multiple people speaking over one another in a cacophonous rush. Technoblade, apparently heated, even surged forward slightly, and Ranboo hastened to get off him, his hands shaking. Ha. His hands were shaking. When was the last time

that had happened? He felt like it happened so rarely, now. Or was that just nostalgia lying to him about how safe and familiar the cabin was and how everything here was *not*?

Deep breaths. Deep breaths. He was fine. He was free, he was *acting like it*, please, please now, at the very least, he had to act like it. It was just a month. Just a month, and then it'd be over, hopefully, hopefully it would be over. Deep breaths. He was going to be perfect.

He wanted to go curl up around Enderchest. He wanted to hide beneath Technoblade's cape. He wanted to go mining, somewhere quiet and dark and soothing. He missed Eidvyr. He wanted everything to stop being so loud and so much and so *important* because he couldn't afford to mess this up he couldn't he couldn't he—

"Hey," Technoblade said quietly, a hand on Ranboo's spine and head leaning in near his, "If you're not hungry, you can tap out. You want to go chill in the room for a little bit?"

Was he allowed? Would that count as a strike against him? Would Captain Puffy even notice, engaged as she was in some sort of argument with Badboyhalo? He didn't even necessarily want to *leave*, as much as he just wanted—he wanted—

He wished this was easier. He wished this was *simpler*. More than anything, he wanted to sink down off this chair and kneel at his master's—his Technoblade's—feet, and rest his head against his knee and slip quietly into the background, to fade out of others' consciousnesses like wind and firelight, an accessory to everyone else's life. To be allowed to be small and submissive and inconsequential and utterly out of control, even if just for a moment again.

But Technoblade was not his master, and Ranboo was free, and couldn't ask other people to make decisions for him, couldn't kneel at someone's feet with fingers carding through his hair and be told that he'd been good. He had to grip the knotted thing inside his chest and squeeze it down tight enough to speak around it, had to force his legs and brain and clumsy tongue to work.

God, he was such a failure, Technoblade and Philza believed in him so evidently and still here he was, wanting bad things, incorrect things, unallowed things. What right did he have? They'd freed him, offered him an open world, and the only thing he actually wanted was the one thing he *wasn't* allowed to want. He was such an ungrateful little brat. He was so ugly and awful and they deserved better from him, he should be better for them, he was such a failure such a failure such a failure how was he supposed to be able to go home when his wants were wrong wrong wrong—

"Ranboo?"

Ranboo sucked in a breath and gripped his wrist, tried to stay the shaking.

"Y-yeah, I think, I think I should maybe go lie down?"

And that meant getting up while everyone else stayed sitting down and that meant everyone's eyes on his back as he left and surely they'd talk about him when he was gone or maybe even before he was fully out of earshot and—

"Okay, do you remember the way?"

Oh Ranboo hadn't even thought of that. *Would* he remember how to get back to the room? This place was large, and they weren't in the place they'd started.

“I don’t, I don’t think so,” he whispered, cheeks hot and eyes downcast.

“Do you want me to walk you down?”

“Please,” he breathed, and Technoblade was so good, so good to him, so kind and generous and he wanted to bow and kneel and thank him and that was wrong that was *wrong* he was wrong he was wrong he was wrong but Technoblade was right there and he was kind and his hand was gently grasping Ranboo’s and Ranboo couldn’t think but he could squeeze that warm hand and follow on the heels of the man he trusted, he could do that, at least.

Behind them voices continued, but only Philza’s mattered so only his stood out from the rest.

“He’s not very used to people, yet, and we’ve had a long day already.”

God, yeah, the day had been so long; how was it still not over?? There was so much time still left, and he was supposed to survive all of it?

The quiet, glowstone-lit, colorful room could not have been more welcome. And the nest-bed was down the floor, inviting and low and Ranboo was free and he was acting like it *but* the bed let him sink down, down, all the way down, and as long as he landed on the round mattress he was fine and it counted and he could curl up against the lip of the mattress, doubled over on himself so his hair and his lower legs both spilled off the edge, and he could grovel at Technoblade’s feet without it looking like he was failing him, without making it clearly evident just how wrong and bad Ranboo’s wretched little self still was.

Technoblade sank to one knee, warm fingers in Ranboo’s hair, and Ranboo keened from behind his palms, face hidden in his hands. It was pathetic, he knew, but it was the least pathetic he was capable of being right that moment.

“You’re okay,” Technoblade said, and the simple, stated comfort flooded through Ranboo like a balm.

Ranboo’s head was hazy, foggy, stuffed up in his skull, and his vision was unfocused when he pulled his fingers away, but he could cling to that. To the straightforwardness of it. The uncomplicated assurance in Technoblade’s tone.

“Thank you.”

“Do you want me to leave you alone?”

Ranboo didn’t want to hold Technoblade up. He’d already done a kindness in walking Ranboo down here. Technoblade’s friends were upstairs, he was part of the conversation, Ranboo shouldn’t want to keep him away from that. But at the same time, Ranboo wanted Technoblade to stay, he wanted those warm fingers to keep idling through his hair and for Technoblade’s familiar voice to keep telling him he was alright. But it would be selfish, to keep him, and rude, to tell him to go away. Ranboo turned his face away, into the blissful darkness of the mattress.

“Okay.” Technoblade squeezed the back of Ranboo’s neck gently, then stood. “Let us know if you need anything; we won’t mind.”

“Okay,” Ranboo echoed, so quiet even Technoblade probably hadn’t heard it.

He felt his wire-tense body go slack, his eyes glazed over and his brain a pressurized fog. If he'd had it in him to think, he might have thought himself akin to a limp doll, bundled up tightly and left where it'd been dropped.

Ten, maybe twenty minutes later, Philza knocked two knuckles against the doorframe as he entered. Ranboo blinked, trying to drag himself into his stupid spindly body, make himself sit up slowly, like moving through molasses.

"Hey, Ranboo. I just wanted to check in; we know it's been a few hours."

HOURS?!?

"Oh." Ranboo blinked up at him, not. He wasn't. He wasn't processing that, exactly. "Um. I'm here."

Philza chuckled, crossing over to the bed and sitting down on the edge of it, next to where Ranboo's head had been. "I can see that. You good?"

He wished. He wished he was. He wanted to be good, for him, for them, he wanted to, but just as much, he wanted to sink off the mattress, all the way to the floor, and grovel at Philza's feet, he wanted to curl around the kind man's ankle with his whole entire hybrid body and thank him or beg for mercy or simply weep and he wanted to do what Philza told him to do but the only thing Philza had ordered was that he be free and act like it and he was so sorry for his wretched wants, his ugly, stupid, disgusting wants.

"I'm trying."

The words were out before he'd really even processed them, high and small and more brokenly pathetic than he'd wanted. Philza's face caved right away, soft concern furrowing his features.

"Hey, we know," he said, slowly extending his arms out to Ranboo.

"I'm *trying*," he repeated incoherently, stupid slave, stupid boy, reaching out and gripping the lower hem of Philza's haori sleeve.

"Ranboo, what's this?" he crooned, Twitch flapping off Philza's shoulder to land on Ranboo's, beaking him gently on the tip of his ear.

"I'm trying," he gasped, curling forward, towards Philza, and Twitch had to flutter off again. "I'm trying. I'm *trying*," he whined, high and tight and wet, "I'm trying, I'm trying, I *swear* I'm trying." He was begging, tears burning at his eyelids, and that was wrong, he wasn't supposed to beg anymore, it was *proof* that he wasn't trying as hard as he could be, that he knew better and still here he was, begging anyway, juxtaposing the very words he was begging with.

"Ranboo we know, we know, hey, we know," Philza hushed, drawing Ranboo into his arms, and Ranboo fell off the mattress anyway, legs curled to his side and face pressed to Philza's chest, strong arms holding him securely.

"I'm try-ing!" Ranboo gasped, choking midway on a sob, and once the tears started he couldn't stop them, couldn't stave them off any longer.

“Ohhh, I’m sorry,” Philza breathed into his hair, Ranboo’s ears pinned back and his hands fisted in Philza’s haori. Big black wings and their dark blue coverings settled over Ranboo’s back, encasing him in warm darkness, shielding him, holding him close. “I’m so sorry, Ranboo, we should’ve been paying closer attention to you.”

“I’m—” Ranboo couldn’t even finish, his traitorous body cutting him off with another sob that wracked his slender frame.

“You’re okay, you’re okay, shhhhhhhh shshshshsh, oh Ranboo we know you’re trying, you’re always trying so hard, and we’re so proud of you, you know that?”

Ranboo wailed, high and wet, because they shouldn’t be, they shouldn’t be proud, he still had bad wants and wrong thoughts and he had fooled them into believing otherwise he was so wretched but he wanted to be good, he wanted to, he was *trying!*

“It’s okay, let it out,” Philza shushed, one arm tight around Ranboo’s back and the other cradling his head, pressing him tightly to Philza’s chest with lips pressed to Ranboo’s hair.

“Do you want me to get Techno?”

Ranboo couldn’t even answer, for all his crying, could just cling, helpless and dumb and needy and he was supposed to be better he was supposed to be able to answer simple questions and voice his wants but he couldn’t, it was already so clearly evident that he was nothing but a failure and he would never make it through a month of this and he just wanted to go back *home* but he was trying he was *trying!*

“Techno could you bring the cactus?” Philza asked mildly, Ranboo’s noisy weeping probably picking up on the communicator with crystalline clarity. Technoblade arrived what felt like mere moments later, tin in hand and not hesitating to cross the room and kneel before the two of them, Philza’s wings parting so Technoblade could settle gentle hands on Ranboo’s crying face.

“What happened?”

“Too much, too fast. We should’ve been more careful easing him into things.”

Technoblade’s lips pressed thin, and he gently wiped at Ranboo’s tears that weren’t being immediately soaked into Philza’s clothes.

“Sorry. I got distracted by Skeppy, I should’ve paid more attention.”

Ranboo tried to shake his head, the pressure inside it making the gesture highly unpleasant actually, and Philza and Technoblade both shushed him. Their group shifted so Technoblade was sat on the mattress instead of kneeling, and Ranboo was pressed between them, arms and wings encasing him so even though he still felt miserable, at least he also felt so, so safe.

They hushed him, reminded him to breathe, pet at his hair and back and wiped tears from his cheeks, soothed him until he quit crying, some small infinity later. Technoblade held him propped up against his strong chest while Philza rubbed small circles of cactus paste into Ranboo’s aching, burning face, and Ranboo wasn’t coherent enough to track how he got moved from there to curled up in the center of the nest, pillows on either side of him and a green sheet draped over his back and side.

Fumblingly, Ranboo reached out and gripped at Technoblade's cape. At the inquisitive noise he made, Ranboo told him, "I'm trying," in a small, high, tiny voice.

Technoblade's lips parted, struck still, and then he let out a heavy breath that made his whole body sink with it, and he cupped the back of Ranboo's neck.

"Hey, we know," he murmured, thumbing at his hair.

Chapter End Notes

Hear me out: awesamdad, but for Ranboo

Thanks everyone for your patience while I moved! The new place is nice so far, and my roommate and I have been Vibin'. I really appreciate everyone who took the time to leave comments these last few weeks, I can't express what a boon they are for my motivation <3

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Technoblade was annoyed with him.

Well, okay. Technoblade was not, perhaps, annoyed. Ranboo had seen him annoyed, with Wilbur, and his memory was not good but he was *pretty* sure this was different. So maybe it was less that Technoblade was annoyed, and more that... more that his patience was finally wearing thin, with Ranboo. That he had better things to do than comfort a neurotic, stupid teen when he was with his friends and could be having fun instead of paying attention to all of Ranboo's many shortcomings.

Captain Puffy was already at the docks when Ranboo woke up, the next morning, which was a blessing. She would be too busy to start weighing him, measuring him up, until they actually arrived at the Central Kingdom, he supposed. So that was one less stressor for Ranboo to grapple with. Badboyhalo was friendly, Sam was startlingly gracious with him, and Antfrost and Skeppy did not seem to take any particular interest in Ranboo. But.

But Technoblade. He. Ranboo had annoyed him, clearly, his meltdown the night before had been too demanding, or maybe just one too many, or possibly Technoblade simply didn't *want* to pay attention to Ranboo. He had friends. Right. He had friends. He wanted to spend time with his friends who were fun and interesting and not panicky idiots who couldn't keep their shit together for *one fucking day* and—

“Hey.”

Ranboo straightened, blinking back into his surroundings. He was just outside the mansion's threshold, one thigh leaned against the large rock he'd initially encountered Antfrost sunning on.

“Hello, sir,” Ranboo returned quietly, straightening as Sam approached him.

Sam's eyes went all squinty, and Ranboo's tail hesitantly flicked at the smile. “Just wanted to check in with you. If you want to play with them, they'd probably let you.”

Ranboo's eyes followed Sam's gesture, an open palmed point to where Technoblade, Skeppy, and Badboyhalo were seated in a circle in the trees, doing something Ranboo was unfamiliar with.

“Um, no, that's, um, that's not what I was—sorry, I shouldn't have been staring, that—I'm—sorry.”

“It's chill,” Sam said, his tone low and cadence slow. Soft. Ranboo was so very lucky, that he kept meeting people who would go out of their way to be gentle with him.

“Thank you,” Ranboo murmured, rubbing at his face with his hands. His cheeks still stung from the night before.

“Did you want to do anything this evening?” Sam's gas mask clicked on, fans whirring. “I'm pretty local, I could show you around.”

“Um,” the idea of going *away* from where Technoblade and Philza were, noooo no no, no thank you, no, but at the same time, maybe he should get out from underfoot? Since Technoblade had better things to do. “Um, what, what do you—I mean...”

Sam examined him a moment. “We could go down portside—” Ranboo’s ears pinned back, tail curling: that’s where Captain Puffy was. They might run into her, if they did. “—or not. We do not have to.”

“Sorry, just, ah—” Ranboo searched around for a lie, an excuse.

“No, my bad, it makes sense you wouldn’t want to get too close to the ocean.”

Oh right! Because water, yes, that was good, that was an excellent excuse to not go to the place where Captain Puffy might see him, without making it seem like he was avoiding her.

“I could show you my workroom?” Sam offered, and Ranboo’s ears perked. He was a skilled mechanic, right? Ranboo was sure his stupid brain wouldn’t comprehend any of it, but even just seeing Sam’s workshop sounded like it would be fascinating.

“That, um, that would be—” oh, except, “—um, where? Is it? Sir.”

“I have a couple,” Sam said warmly, half-stepping back and turning in the doorway, holding the door open for Ranboo, who scurried in. “But the one I have in the Badlands is in Bad and Skeppy’s basement.”

Oh good! Ranboo could be out of the way *and* not have to go too far from Technoblade and Philza.

Ranboo followed him down a flight, through a hall, down another flight of stairs, and into a large space that was made to feel much less large thanks to all the—everything. There were shelves and drawers and desks and makeshift-shelves nailed into the walls and cabinets and boxes and a whole pile of what looked like scrap metal and there was a wall full of hooks that had dozens and dozens of tools hanging off them and some of the drawers were tiny, holding screws of various sizes, and some of the drawers were large and Ranboo could only guess their purpose and there were chests and wires and the whole place was alight even without the glowstone, all of the redstone emanating glittering potential that filled the space.

Ranboo sneezed.

“Ah, sorry, the redstone dust is maybe a little thick. Here,” Sam crossed to a small chest and pulled out a face mask which he extended to Ranboo, and Ranboo accepted it with a small thanks. He sneezed again into the cloth, feeling bad for *immediately* getting his weird germs on it, but after that his nose seemed to calm down.

Sam showed him around the space, explaining what things were, what he was doing with them, sometimes where or how he got them. He showed Ranboo his current project, too, a form of Nether travel that didn’t rely on meltable ice or flammable wood. Ranboo hesitantly edged closer and closer, ears perked, curious, as Sam lifted and rotated and showed off the many interchangeable parts, poking at their wiring and explaining their purposes.

Ranboo’s hand accidentally brushed up against body-warmed cloth, a leg or maybe arm? Sam’s secondary set of limbs, between his arms and legs, the ones that had thumbs and pads but he used to walk when he dropped down on all fours. Ranboo startled at the touch, but resettled, attention

directed by Sam's mild gesturing. Most of the information was going in one ear and right back out the other, but Ranboo found even just the simple act of listening oddly soothing. Sam had a nice voice. And he didn't really look directly at Ranboo, mostly just the tech in his hands.

"There you are," Philza remarked, walking through the doorway, and Ranboo was on his feet in a breath, tail flicking up. He trotted over, trying (and failing (so bad)) not to look over-eager or anxious.

"Hello sir," Ranboo greeted, hoping Philza was there for good reasons. Or at the very least neutral reasons. Looking for him.

"Hey mate. Call me Phil."

"No sir," Ranboo said happily, tail swaying out, and sure it was a little weird to make an inside joke in front of Sam, but Sam was very nice and patient and probably wouldn't mind? "You were looking for me?"

"Just wanted to check in." Philza sneezed, startling Twitch on his shoulder, "Techno and I hadn't seen you in a minute and we didn't want to leave you out in deep waters."

Or any waters, ideally. Ranboo smiled at him. "I'm okay. Mister Sam has been showing me his inventions."

Philza let out a happy giggle and Ranboo's tail flicked. "Pog! You want me to hang around?"

Ranboo considered that.

"Um."

Well, since Philza was here.

"Um," he repeated, quieter.

"It's okay if you do, it's okay if you don't," Philza assured, and Ranboo nodded.

"Just, um, is," Ranboo dropped his voice low and quiet, knowing it was rude to whisper in front of people but not really wanting Sam to hear. "Is Technoblade annoyed with me?"

Philza's face dropped into a concerned, confused frown. The confusion was—probably good?

"No, mate, why'd you think that?" he asked, thankfully also quiet. Ranboo leaned into the hand that reached up for his face.

"Just, um, he, he didn't seem very—this morning, he—I, it's, probably stupid, nevermind, I'm sorry."

"Shhh, nah mate, it's good for you to ask for reassurance when you need it." Okay, but what if Ranboo needed it *constantly*, what then? Well, not need, but want, he guessed.

"Thank you. Um. You don't have to stay if you don't want to, I know, you've been enjoying spending time with your friends."

“Yeah, well, I enjoy spending time with you too, it’s no hardship,” Philza said, thumbing at Ranboo’s cheek.

“Heeeeeeyyy!” Captain Puffy shouted, skidding into view, and Ranboo jolted, tail poofing up and making an embarrassingly loud vocalization. “Okay good news Phil and Ranboo: I should only need tomorrow to wrap everything up, and we could either head out tomorrow afternoon or the morning after depending on how we’re feeling. Hi Sam!”

“Hey Puffy. Glad to hear everything’s been going well.”

“Oh yeah this has been *speedy*! This is why I always come back to this port I get so bleepin’ lucky when I’m here.”

“Not to visit your friends or anything.”

“What? No! Of course not!” Captain Puffy laughed, Philza and Sam chuckling along with. Then her starbright attention was on *him* and Ranboo curled a hand into Philza’s haori.

“Sorry we haven’t really had the chance to get to know each other,” Captain Puffy told him, looking straight at him *looking straight at him*, and Ranboo nodded uncomfortably. “I’ve just been trying to get everything handled and wrapped up so we can bounce.”

“N-no rush,” Ranboo murmured, wishing she *would* take her time with it. The Badlands were new and strange but at least they weren’t new and strange AND involving the judgement of Ranboo’s abilities and competency and whole entire worth as a person.

“Anyway, Ant’s the one who made dinner tonight, I came to collect all you boys.”

“Nice,” Sam said, rising to his feet and putting his project away. Ranboo handed back over the mask Sam had lent him, who tossed it into a pile of other dirty-looking cloth stuff. That was probably for the best. Ranboo had no real opinion regarding dinner, and honestly couldn’t remember a single thing he’d eaten since he’d come here. Not that he thought he hadn’t eaten! He definitely had, he’d feel hungry if he hadn’t, his body was very used to having regular meals, nowadays. Just, well, memory. Him. It added up.

And just as soon as that meal, tense and stressful and surrounded by people and also Technoblade who Ranboo still wasn’t *sure* wasn’t mad at him, was over he forgot that one too. Amazing how that worked out.

The next morning, Ranboo watched Technoblade and Philza get up, but stayed put on the low nest-like mattress right where he was.

“You okay?” Technoblade asked, and Ranboo wished he could be pleased to hear that Technoblade still showed him concern, but his nauseous stomach clouded over those thoughts and his anxieties that he’d overbothered the man persisted.

“M fine,” he murmured, eyes squinting closed when Technoblade crouched down and rustled his hair.

“Did you have a question you wanted to ask Techno, Ranboo?” Philza asked cheerfully, Twitch preening Max’s fur to negligible effect as Max followed Philza out of the room.

Oh right. Philza's a fucking nark, Ranboo remembered bitterly, tail poofed, then mentally chastized himself. Philza was kind, he was good, he shouldn't be angry with him.

Technoblade's head tilted and Ranboo bit his lip, turning his face away from him and curling further under the purple sheet.

But there was no avoiding it now.

"Are you—mad at me?"

"I'm not," Technoblade stated, repositioning so he was sitting on the low mattress, hooves cast out in front of him and leaning back on one hand, his other resuming petting at Ranboo's hair. "Why?"

"It's just, you haven't been—I'm sorry, I'm just—It's stupid, it's stupid, nevermind, I'm sorry I brought it up."

Technoblade's warm fingers plucked tangles from Ranboo's messy hair, gently pulling them out as he sat in silence. Ranboo covered his mouth with both hands, eyes squeezed shut. Stupid. Why was he always freaking out over *nothing*?

"I haven't been paying as much attention to you," Technoblade said slowly, and Ranboo felt so *pathetic*.

"You're with your friends, you don't have to, it makes sense—"

"No, I get it."

Ranboo clicked his teeth together. Why could he never just. Shut up???

"I'm not paying as much attention to you because I'm with my friends. You've been having a hard time and I'm *still* getting distracted, it makes you feel like I don't care as much about you or like I'm rejecting you now that I've got older friends. It can make it feel like they're 'better' than you. I get it." Technoblade sighed. "I get it."

Technoblade shifted, and then tugged on Ranboo's nightshirt, urging him up. "C'mon, come here."

Ranboo let himself be tugged, catching how Technoblade barely muttered under his breath, "What would Philza say?" and that made Ranboo feel a little better too, because Ranboo was bad at this but at least Technoblade wasn't great with this whole. Eugh. Everything, either. Ranboo pressed his face against Technoblade's shoulder, his cape a simple light cotton instead of the fur Ranboo was used to but it was still dark and Technoblade was still warm and solid and smelled masculine and familiar and good.

His hands were familiar, heavy, broad, and brushed up and down Ranboo's back as he held him. "I'm not mad at you. I haven't forgotten about you. I don't like them better than you. You're still important to me—Chat shut up I can't think with you screaming like that—my point is: you're fine. Everything is good here, you don't have to worry about it. Don't worry about it."

"Thank you," Ranboo breathed, feeling that anxiety, at least, unwind as Technoblade held him. The other ten billion anxieties, well, they would do their own thing, but knowing Technoblade wasn't annoyed with him was a pretty big weight off his chest.

“Uhhh, yeah. It’s okay for you to let us know when you need reassurance, too, like, I know *I’m* one to talk, but you don’t gotta wait for Phil to force it out in the open for you to ask if I still like you.”

Ranboo snorted, there was... a memory, there. He pulled out his memory, flipping through. Oh! With Wilbur, right, Technoblade had—Philza had done this then, too, and right, that’s when Ranboo learned about the rejection thing, right right right. Since he had his notebook out, he jotted down his notes for that morning.

“Thank you,” he repeated, putting the journal away. “Um. What’s Chat yelling about?”

Technoblade snorted. “They’re losing their minds over the fact that I said I care about you out loud. Chat I have friends, Chat. This isn’t groundbreaking information. We all knew that already, Chat, you don’t gotta make it into a thing.”

Ranboo giggled quietly, shifting so he was more reclined against Technoblade, long arms noodling around his waist. Technoblade pat his hair, making his eyes squint closed, and then scritch at the back of Ranboo’s skull.

“You feeling better?”

“Mm.” Ranboo nosed against Technoblade’s tabard. “Are we leaving today?”

“Depends on Captain Puffy, but yeah probably. Fortunately the Central Kingdom’s not even a whole hour through the Nether, from here, so we should be there before you know it.”

That was not actually as reassuring as Technoblade seemed to think.

“Okay,” Ranboo said, his stomach twisting with a sharp nausea that was almost painful. Would it start that evening, then? Ranboo had no time, no time! He wished he knew what to do, how to act so it would *count*. “Is it okay if I stay here?”

“Sure. Do you want me to bring you something to eat?”

Ranboo shook his head.

“Do you want me to stay here with you?”

It made him happy that Technoblade offered, but he shook his head.

“Okay. Are you alright?”

“I’m—anxious. About therapy.”

“Reasonable, reasonable, I wouldn’t want people poking around in my brain either.”

Oh god, she was going to mess with his *brain*!? Did she, was she magic? Was she—magically—he? Ah. Ahhhh! He hoped it wasn’t that she was actually going to *physically* enter into his skull, though he wasn’t one to know. He thought she was just going to be correcting his thoughts, he, hhhhg, okay, okay, okay, this was fine, he’d agree to it either way it wasn’t like there was any choice in the matter he just had to do right he just had to be *perfect*.

“It’ll be pog though,” Technoblade assured, squeezing the back of Ranboo’s neck. “It’ll help, ideally. If nothing else, the good captain should be able to help Phil and I know what the heck *we’re*

doing.”

“R-right. Um. Is it, tonight, does it start?”

“Nah, nah, don’t worry about that.”

“Okay. When—?”

“If we head to the CK tonight, tomorrow. If we leave tomorrow, the day after. But really, and I know I am—again—one to talk, but don’t sweat about it. Puffy’s smart, and she’s nice; she’s not gonna make this weirdchamp.”

“I might,” Ranboo muttered, then flinched at his own words. Technoblade squeezed the back of his neck again, then pet a broad hand down his spine.

“That is okay. That is okay if you do. She’s the therapist; she knows more about this,” Technoblade gestured vaguely at Ranboo’s head, “stuff, than any of the rest of us do. Maybe you can throw her a curveball, give her a hard time for the rest of us.”

“I—don’t want to do that. I would prefer to make this as painless as possible.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Technoblade hushed, petting down his hair, neck, and back, “You just focus on yourself, okay? She knows what to do with herself, you just focus on you.”

Right. Right. If Ranboo could just *act free* then everything would be fine and he could stay and he would just focus on what he had to do, Technoblade was right, Technoblade was always right.

Ranboo closed his eyes and squeezed his arms around Technoblade’s middle just slightly, and Technoblade chuffed and ruffled Ranboo’s hair.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay?”

But the longer Technoblade stayed, the more reluctant Ranboo would be to let him leave. He just wanted to curl up in his arms or be hidden by his cape or sit quiet in his shadow forever and ever already, and Technoblade’s friends were here. His friends, who he hadn’t seen in a while, and who he’d be saying goodbye to later that afternoon or evening or whenever they left. Ranboo was being *selfish*.

“No, it’s okay, thank you though,” Ranboo murmured, and forced himself to push up off his elbows and roll off Technoblade, flopping down on the mattress. Technoblade ruffled his hair and Ranboo’s tail fwipped up in response, and then Technoblade got up, popped his back and left with a reminder to ask if Ranboo needed anything.

Right then, all Ranboo really wanted was to go back to sleep for a few hours, so he did.

When he woke up again, he still felt nauseous, but maybe less incapable of taking on the world and his no good terrible awful horrible frightening situation.

“Oh, hey,” Antfrost greeted when Ranboo was up and dressed and wandering aimlessly around the main floor, trying to find his way.

“Hello sir,” Ranboo greeted.

“Need anything?”

“Um,” Ranboo fidgeted. “Is, there, a blessed bell? Here?”

Antfrost chuckled. “Yeah, Techno makes Skeppy keep one around for when he visits. It’s kinda hard to get to though, cause, uh,” Antfrost gestured vaguely, “Skeppy.”

Ranboo tilted his head inquisitively, though it made sense when Antfrost showed him the bell was on top of the mansion, with no ladders or stairs to actually get onto the roof.

“Ah.”

“I could give you a boost if you wanted,” Antfrost offered.

“Oh, n-no, no need, I’ll just. Climb a tree and hop over, or something.”

“Yeah that’s what Techno does.”

“Thank you!” Ranboo called after Antfrost, who waved as he returned back inside.

Okay! Okay.

Hm.

That... that tree looked decent. Ranboo didn’t weigh a whole lot, despite how much of him there was. Taffy boy. Stretchy pulled out long skinny boy. Hmm. He let out a little string of vocalizations, tail twitch-twitch-twitching as he climbed. Ah. Ahhhh. Okay. He was on the tree branch that was more or less even with the roof. Okay. Hmm. He hopped across with a little vwoop, not necessarily a happy vwoop but a vwoop nonetheless, and let himself just sort of cling to the roof right there near the edge for a hot second.

Okay.

He got up, staying mostly down low so he could use his hands to brace as well, and crept up to the top point of the roof, where a blessed bell hung in a small little shrine of its own, and he set himself down in front of it.

The ringing was familiar, and almost reminiscent of home.

Hello, um, Universe, it’s me again. I don’t remember what I prayed for last time, that I did this, but, um. Would you kindly please help me? Again. I’m going to do something very terrifying and important and if it doesn’t go well I’m going to lose everything I love, so may I please have good fortune with it?

Ranboo sighed. He sounded dumb, even in his own head.

Thank you. Um. Have a good day?

Ranboo wasn’t very confident that he was doing the whole praying thing “right” but he hoped the Universe understood that he was trying his best, and that counted.

Ranboo shimmied his way back off the roof and down the tree, marginally less successful than he’d been getting up, and it seemed like he blinked and then Captain Puffy was there, hair in a high and

poofy ponytail and grin on her face, announcing that she just wanted to shower and pack up her overnight bag, and then she'd be ready to go.

Technoblade and Philza took the time to load up their own bags and resettle everything on Carl. Or, Philza resettled everything on Carl, while Technoblade ooo'ed and ahhh'ed over Skeppy and Badboyhalo's ravager.

"I just love this animal," Technoblade praised, petting down its massive broadside and caressing its giant horns while Skeppy teased him from perched atop the mammoth animal's back. Sam joined them, expressing his desire to go pay a visit to his boyfriend in the city and figuring this was as good a time as any, with a group making Nether travel safer than going solo. Then the group was saying goodbye, Technoblade receiving hugs from Badboyhalo and Skeppy, Philza shaking hands with Antfrost.

And then they were leaving.

Then they were back in the open, hot mesa, approaching an obsidian omen with magic that seemed far more sinister, this time around. Then they were in the Nether, sweltering and oppressive and dangerous. Sam remarked on how the tech he'd shown Ranboo might apply to the actual physical space around them, but Ranboo was. Maybe not listening very attentively.

Fortunately, Technoblade was no liar, and it wasn't even an hour before they were on another curated stretch of road with a flickering purple rectangle marking their endpoint. More curiously, there were other *people* out and about in the Nether, over here, and the portal itself looked stately, large, and almost-decorated around.

Ranboo shivered as he stepped through the portal, the magic nauseating on his already weak stomach but not as bad as it could be, he guessed, and he gratefully accepted when Philza held out his coat to him before letting Technoblade help him back into the wing cozies.

It wasn't as cold here as it was back home, but it was a far cry from the Badland's warmth. This place had snow and it actually felt like winter, and the portal was seemingly located near the center of some sort of hub. It was *busy* here, people and pack animals going about their business, chatter and footsteps and wagon wheels and the occasional shout filling the air.

Next to him, Sam's gas mask clicked on.

"Alrighty boys, I've got a baby and grandbaby to go say hi to; I'll meet you back at my place this evening! Door's probably open but if not you can let yourselves in. Sam, I dunno if you're sticking around?"

"If I am, I'll be at Ponk's place."

"Okay well I will hug you just in case and I will see you when I see you!" Captain Puffy pulled Sam down for a hug, and then she was off in a whirl of red coattails and cloudy hair. "Later!"

"Later," Philza called after her mildly. He and Technoblade then shook hands with Sam, who was also parting ways, and Ranboo timidly followed suit when Sam extended a green hand to him.

"Take it easy," Sam bode farewell, and Ranboo gave a little wave as the man turned and left.

“We’re stopping by the bakery, first,” Technoblade informed Ranboo. Wait, had Technoblade told him that before? He took out his memory book. Huh, yeah, there it was, in Ranboo’s own handwriting. Okay.

“Okay.”

“We know it’s kinda loud here, but it shouldn’t take too long,” Technoblade assured, and Ranboo smiled to see him once more change out his thin cape for the familiar, furred one.

“That’s alright,” he said, sticking close to Carl’s side. Nobody seemed to be paying him any attention, here, despite his height and obviously Ender appearance.

Actually. There were a *lot* of hybrids here. More than Ranboo was used to. Not that he, uh, not that he had a whole lot of memories about big spaces like this, kinda sorta just the one when they’d walked Wilbur and Fundy off and Technoblade had gotten the bell, and Ranboo really couldn’t remember much from before Technoblade, but still. Still. There were a lot of hybrids out doing their thing. Maybe a half-Enderman wasn’t quite the spectacle he might have otherwise been?

Even so, Ranboo kept his head down and stuck close to Technoblade and Philza’s heels. The city they were in was a large one, and they walked for a while without any notable decrease in the amount of people around them. Eventually they came across a very charming brick building, “Niki’s Bakery” in flowing script over the door and the windows showing off an assortment of delectables. Admittedly, Ranboo had smelled it before he’d seen it, but he admired the exterior as Technoblade fastened Carl’s reins around a fencepost and told Max to sit and stay.

“Halloooooo,” Technoblade called as the trio entered the building, and the woman behind the counter—who Ranboo could only assume was the “Niki” in question—made a happy little gasp and waved.

“Techno! Philza! It’s so good to see you!”

Technoblade smiled warmly as they approached the counter, Niki flipping up one of those hinge-counter-trapdoor-thingies and coming out for a hug, which Technoblade and Philza happily gave her.

“Sorry for the short notice,” Philza remarked, and Niki waved him off.

“No, no, not at all. I’m always happy to get a call from you. And you must be Ranboo!”

“Hello ma’am.” Ranboo accepted the hug she pulled him into. She smelled like bread and fruit and sugar. Well, mostly bread.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. Go ahead and pick out whatever you’d like from the shop.”

“Um.”

“Nah, nah, Niki’s right. We like to stock up whenever we’re in town; she’s a really good baker.”

“I’ll have you know, I am good at everything I do,” she chimed playfully, elbowing Technoblade so lightly he might not have even felt it, and the three chuckled.

“That you are. An example to us all,” Philza agreed, pulling a loaf of dill bread off the shelf and adding it to a woven basket with a charmingly patterned cloth lining. Ranboo blinked—he was

mostly sure that they didn't own anything like that themselves—but oh, he'd gotten it from a stack near the counter.

Okay. Ranboo got his choice of baked goods. That was. Probably fine. He explored the space hesitantly: it *all* looked good.

“Puffy’s hosting us; any recommendations for what she might like?”

“Twitch, behave.”

“Last time I saw her she was in a lemon raspberry mood, but she’s been away at sea for a while now. I know sweet rolls are always a safe bet.”

“I’ll put you out with Carl and Max, don’t think I won’t.”

“We’ll bring both,” Technoblade stated casually, putting a bag of rolls into Philza’s basket. Ranboo bit his lip and carefully took a cinnamon roll from its place, and wrapped it in the thin paper available, and extended it to Philza. He was free. He’d been told to do this, even. So he *knew* it was okay and that he could. But even so, this wasn’t like taking from the stovetop back home, when food was made for all three. He was specifically selecting a food item that would be specifically for him, and when he was already feeling uncertain and wishing for guidance.

But he *wasn’t* going to have another mini breakdown in the middle of a nice lady’s store so he took a couple cookies as well, set them in Philza’s basket, and then placed himself nice and out of the way near her counter. He observed Technoblade and Philza as they set items in the basket, murmuring quietly to each other about this or that, and the two other people in the store.

The couple (Ranboo thought they were a couple; they hadn’t kissed or anything but they were close and friendly and smiled at one another and maybe Ranboo was wrong, they might be a couple, they might not, he wasn’t really one to say but they’d make a nice looking couple, if they were one) approached the counter and Niki counted up what they owed. She wrote their receipt down on a pad of paper, tore the note off, and handed it to them with their purchase and a cheerful “Come back soon!”

Then it was just the four of them in her store, and Ranboo fiddled with the tufted end of his tail.

“Hello,” Niki greeted, quiet and soft-toned, and Ranboo’s ears flicked up.

“Hello ma’am. Everything here smells very good.”

“Oh thank you! I’m glad you like it. Here, try this.” Niki pushed a muffin into Ranboo’s hands, and he couldn’t even fumble over his tongue fast enough to protest before she’d pulled her hands back away, leaving him to either grasp it or drop it.

“O-oh, um, thank you? I, that is, uh, alright.”

Niki beamed.

Ranboo nibbled on the muffin, his stomach gurgling unhappily. It was the first thing he’d eaten all day, and his anxiety—though briefly alleviated—still left it twisted up in knots.

“Oh, are you hungry? Here.”

“Oh, n-no, not really, just, ahhh, hm.” He watched her slice off a piece of bread from one of the loaves and pull butter and a golden jar from one of her chests. She buttered the slice and drew a zigzag of honey over it, then pressed that into Ranboo’s palm as well.

He stood there, a baked good in each hand, and uh. Well. He uhhh, guessed he had to eat these now.

“So everything’s been quiet here?” Technoblade asked, words clearly meant for Niki.

“Mm-hm. Nothing’s really happened since the last time you were here. Taxes are low, roads are maintained. Oh! Actually, they did finish that sewer project they were in the middle of during your last visit. That’s been nice.”

“Good, good, glad to hear that. So uhhhhh, any new legislation? Court events?”

“No, not really. A couple amendments here or there, some stricter safety guidelines with regards to possession of tnt or publicly constructed builds, but nothing that doesn’t make sense, and I haven’t seen that authority abused. The last court event was a private banquet and I ended up catering part of it. A relatively quiet affair, nothing overly extravagant.”

“Nice. Let us know if there’s ever anything exciting going on, yeah?” Technoblade said as he and Philza brought their basket of baked goods to the counter (and there were a lot of items in that basket, wow).

“You two will be the first to know,” Niki promised, examining the items. “You two should try the apple fritters, and either an orange tart or a single serving carrot cake.”

“An apple fritter each, or we’re sharing?” Philza asked as Technoblade went to collect the items.

“Each, one for each, they’re quite good.”

“We believe you,” Technoblade said easily.

“Alrighty, with those your total is 27 emeralds.”

Wow. They really did like to stock up, huh? That was. Wouldn’t one emerald usually buy like, 6 plain loaves? Ranboo got that they were buying nice pastries and the sort, but even still. Wow.

And then. Ah. And then. Technoblade handed over 27, but uh, he wasn’t paying with emeralds? He was giving her emerald *blocks*? Which was, Ranboo was pretty sure, nine times as much as Niki was asking for?

But she took the blocks like that was natural, quickly setting them into her enderchest and thanking them for their business. And she gave Technoblade a receipt, but it was? Not from the top of the pad, like the last people’s had been, it was from the middle, and it was a whole *bunch* of papers together? And Ranboo... Ranboo got the feeling that there was more going on than what he knew about, but that was normal.

Ranboo got the feeling that this time, he didn’t know what was happening because he wasn’t *supposed* to know.

“Have a nice day! Don’t be strangers!”

“We’ll try not to,” Philza said with a laugh, “Sorry we haven’t been out to visit you lately.”

‘Oh it’s fine, it’s fine, I’m just always happy to see you outside of business, too, you know.’

“We know Niki. Thanks again for this.”

“And you as well,” she said cheerfully, and then the three of them were back outside with the cold and the noise and the motion, and Technoblade freed Carl from the fencepost while Philza settled the food into one of the packs.

A warm, broad palm on the small of Ranboo’s back, and Ranboo stooped down to listen.

“How’re you holding up?”

“I’m okay. Miss Niki was very kind. Um. You were, kind of, uh, generous with her?”

“We like to support our local businesses. And friends. Don’t worry about it. Also don’t bring it up ever again.”

“Yessir.”

“Given a choice between being alone in a stranger’s house and being with Phil and I in a different stranger’s house, talking to that stranger, which would you pick?”

“With you,” Ranboo answered without hesitation.

“Okay. Last stop before we head to Puffy’s, then we’re done for the night, I promise.”

Ranboo followed his friends back through the streets, past the busy central hub and the large, ornate Nether portal, towards a uh. Well. THE um. Castle.

It was a very nice looking castle. Colorful. The flag was a rainbow, which Ranboo liked. But it was also *a castle*. You know. That thing important people lived in. And they were just. Walking in???? The gates were unguarded but even so! Even so! Ranboo really felt like maybe they potentially should probably not be there??

Staff, uncollared, straight-spined, not slaves, carried on their business openly and without fear of the strangers or any guests of the master of the house seeing them. So Ranboo wasn’t sure if maybe the giant doorway thingy had somehow been a servants’ door, or if the rules of good manners were different here than the last place he’d been, where people kept staff.

Oh okay okay okay that was a throne room that was a fucking throne room and that was a place they were just casually entering okay okay okay maybe Ranboo should’ve picked the staying alone in a stranger’s empty house option actually—except it was too late to change his mind now, and no way was he going anywhere that wasn’t glued to Technoblade’s side.

“We’re looking to speak with Eret.”

“I believe she’s at the sheep pen, sir.”

“Thanks.”

Ranboo followed again, out to a courtyard, and saw a large pen of *exclusively* pink sheep. Weren’t those extremely rare? Even if most of them had been bred here, there would’ve still had to have

been a considerably large starting number. Belatedly, he took note of the person standing next to the pen, an individual of quiet grace who only really stood out because of the crown she was wearing.

“Techno, Phil,” the *royal* greeted, hopping the fence and extending a hand, “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Just wanted to check in and ask a couple questions,” Philza said warmly, shaking hands with a smile.

“I am an open book.” Ranboo locked up as attention fell on him. “Hello there, I’m Eret, monarch of the Central Kingdom.”

“Uh.” Ranboo stared, light-headed, at the hand Eret extended towards him. “I’m, Ranboo,” he said, woodenly shaking hands and trying his *best* not to cause offense.

“He’s shy. We were wondering how you would describe this country’s infrastructure,” Technoblade pressed onward, and Ranboo felt a thousandth swell of gratitude for the man, hiding once again in the backdrop of Technoblade’s impressive figure and commanding presence.

He’d shaken hands with a monarch. He’d somehow lived to tell of it. This was so, so, so far from what he’d spent so much of his life learning and growing used to. To have even *conceptualized* that a slave would one day have his name asked for by royalty was *absurd*. He wasn’t going to hyperventilate about it though. He was going to pull the lemon out of his inventory and feel its sorta bumpy-wrinkly texture and reassure himself that he had it, if he needed it, but he *was not* going to hyperventilate about this.

“Okay, good, good. That all sounds good. Now, the followup question: how prepared do you feel like this country is to receive an influx of refugees?”

He hoped he wasn’t supposed to be paying attention to what they were saying. Technoblade’s voice cut through the fog of Ranboo’s brain enough for the words to hit his thoughts, but they slipped back out just as easily, and Queen? Eret’s voice was such a low timbre Ranboo was hard pressed to have it as anything other than faded background noise.

Theoretically being royal should’ve made Eret’s words *more* important, but Ranboo’s head was doing funny little things at the moment so he was just going to. Not panic. That was a good goal for him to have.

If she got mad at him for ignoring her, he could just apologize. Technoblade wouldn’t let her hurt him.

Max nudged a wet nose into Ranboo’s palm and he jolted, then reached down and pet him.

“Who’s a good boy?” he murmured quietly, stroking Max’s ears, and then ruffled the fur around Max’s collar. Ranboo couldn’t imagine it would be fun to have fur stuck under there.

Some discussion later—something about a number of houses and beds and buildings and food and taxes and land and space and a whole lot of variables Ranboo couldn’t keep track of and didn’t want to try—Technoblade said, “Alright, well, thanks for the chat. We’ll be seeing you around, Eret.”

“See you around, Techno. Phil. Ranboo. Try not to get yourselves killed out there, mm?”

“Ah, but Eret, haven’t you heard? Technoblade never dies!”

Philza and Eret laughed, and Eret shook her head. “I suppose I’d best be off to have a conversation with Callahan, now?”

“Probably for the best. Bye mate.”

“Bye.”

Who was Callahan??

“Reindeer! Reindeer!”

“Yes, Twitch, Callahan’s the cervitaur.” Oh. That answered that? Philza cast Ranboo a knowing smile. “They call him reindeer because ‘civil engineer’ is too complicated for their bird mouth.”

“Hey!” Twitch pecked at Philza’s ear, drawing a fleck of blood, though Philza just laughed it off and swatted lightly at them. Playful. Why was everyone so casual?

“Deep breaths,” Technoblade reminded him, and Ranboo sucked in air. Ah. He’d forgotten.

“Um. Was that—she’s—monarch?”

“Yeah, they rule this kingdom, but try not to let them intimidate you. End of the day, they’re still just a person, same as you or me.”

“We’re anarchists, but we leave him alone cause he really does treat it like a job, not just some fancy title. We’re against coercive hierarchies first and foremost, and at the heart of it, Eret really does care about keeping people safe and watched over. The responsibility is a burden more than a privilege.” Technoblade snorted, a distinctly piggish sound. “As it darn well should be.”

“But really. Eret might look intimidating at a glance but they’re a good one, at least in our books.”

“Okay.” That did not actually comfort Ranboo at all. Well. Maybe a little. The idea that a monarch would be ‘just a person’ or ‘same as you or me’ was not one Ranboo was even remotely familiar with, but it lined up with what he knew of Technoblade and Philza. Of course *they* would see it that way. They were in a league of their own, and yet they treated everyone around them equally. Of course they wouldn’t see Eret as anything special, just as they didn’t see Ranboo as anything inferior.

Okay. Actually maybe that did comfort him a little. He was going to see Eret as important and terrifying, of course, but he was with Technoblade and Philza, and they played by their own rules.

Also, gender? Ranboo had a looser concept of that than most people, he’d learned, but he also knew that it was something other people got a lot of hangups about. Maybe he’d ask about the fluctuating pronouns when he was feeling a little less rattled.

They grabbed Carl again, walked through the busy city again, and the roads grew quieter and quieter the further they moved from the hub. Eventually they came to a stop before a pleasant looking cottage. The yard was a bit undertended, foliage that had died in fall left in the lawn where it drooped, now frozen and half-hidden by snow. Paint was chipping here or there, but all in all it looked absolutely lovely. Pretty, aqua and prismatic and beige, and was that a localized beacon? Ranboo knew places of the state had beacons; amplifiers for communicator frequencies, sometimes

radios, boons from local gods and whatnot, but those were large, and more importantly, public. Localized beacons were much less powerful, of course, and rarer to find. Captain Puffy's travels must be successful sorts, indeed.

They stabled Carl in what seemed to be a storage shed, large enough for the horse but only just, and they had to move some of Captain Puffy's belongings, which set Ranboo's agitation on high. Then, inside (and they really did just... walk into the woman's house without her there. Ah. Ha.), they lit the kitchen stove and livingroom fireplace, and Technoblade and Philza explored a bit.

"If I remember, she's got a pretty big basement? I dunno if we should go down there though."

"Yeah it's large. She uses it mostly for storage and shenanigans."

Philza snorted. "Shenanigans?"

"You know," Technoblade waved his hand vaguely, "tomfoolery. Hooligan activities. Shenanigans."

Philza grunted and kicked his feet up, sitting heavily on an old and saggy couch. "Well, good for her. I'm gonna rest my eyes for a moment, let me know if we're waiting to eat with her or if we figure she'll stay at Foolish's place."

"She seemed excited to see him, and her grandson. I say we eat and call it an early night."

"Fine by me," Philza agreed mildly, hands crossed over his belly and striped hat tilted down over his eyes.

Ranboo quietly helped Technoblade make dinner in the unfamiliar kitchen, and after eating the three found their way into what was hopefully the spare bedroom. It was less furnished than the other (so many duck figurines and pictures and assorted knickknacks. So many). So. Hopefully the spare.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, it would start.

Ranboo had been lucky, that Captain Puffy had been busy at the docks, and then busy with her grandson. Ranboo had been lucky, that it hadn't started sooner. But even luck could not stop time.

He squeezed his eyes shut and clung to Technoblade beneath Philza's blanketing wing. He had no bell to ring, but he lifted a prayer up to the Universe anyways. That fortune guide him. That any god listening could grant him help, or at least, courage.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, he would be *perfect*.

Techno during the Will visit: Phil what if Ranboo hates me?

Phil: Ranboo does not hate you

Ranboo during the Skeppy visit: Philza what if Technoblade hates me?

Phil: Techno does not hate you

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Thank you to everyone who has commented! I'm gonna try and get caught up on my responses, this week's been busy, oof. But I read every single one and they all fill me with delight <3

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Ever increasing chapter count my behorred.

Chapter warning for stress-induced vomiting.

Also, I added the Ranboo-centric tag to the work. I've been debating it ever since someone brought it up in a comment and finally decided to go with it. Let me know if you think I shouldn't?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The cinnamon roll he'd gotten from the bakery was on the table.

It was breakfast.

He should eat.

The smell—no, the *thought* of food made him so nauseated he could hurl. Admittedly, it wasn't the primary thing nauseating him, but it was on the list! It was on the list. He sat where Philza'd placed him and stared at his lovely bakery cinnamon roll and tried not to ruin Captain Puffy's carpet and everyone's morning.

He couldn't.

He couldn't he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't why'd he ever thought this would be something he could do why had he *ever* thought he might make it through a month of this he couldn't he couldn't but he *had* to or else he would lose everything he loved and valued and wanted and everything that meant something to him and the first people who'd been kind to him and he couldn't lose them but he couldn't do this and—

He didn't jump when Technoblade touched a hand to his shoulder. He was wound too tense to even move.

"You look kinda stuck in your own head there."

Haha. He was!

"Ah. Yes."

"You're nervous?"

Petrified.

"Yessir."

“You’ll be okay.” Across the table, Twitch cawed loudly and tried to steal Captain Puffy’s sweet roll. “Puffy’s a weirdo but she’s good people. She’s not gonna be weirdchamp.”

Right.

“Right.”

Okay.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

Ranboo tried to smile at him. Tried to take a bite and act fucking normal for once.

The good news was that it *didn’t* immediately come back up!

But yeah, no, absolutely not eating, would do that some other day, thanks.

Technoblade was staring at him.

Ranboo reached out.

He shuddered as he was pulled in against Technoblade’s side, still taut as a strung bow but at least safer like this. Safer in the warmth, safer in Technoblade’s shadow, safer in the scent and the solidity of the man he leaned against, who saved him and cared for him and was the first to touch him kindly.

Please don’t make me leave. Even if I fail, please don’t.

But not even the warm familiarity of Technoblade’s side could shield him from the passage of time, and all too soon Captain Puffy was rising from her seat.

“Alrighty Mister Ranboo! Ready to head over to my office?”

No.

But he never would be.

“Yes ma’am.”

It was hard to make himself leave.

“Um. Are you and Philza still going to be here tonight?”

“Ayup. We’ll tell you when we’re going to head out. Do you want to write that down?”

Had Ranboo asked before?

He noted that quickly, handwriting scribbly like it had been when moments to write were stolen and he hid his notebook from others’ view. Then he was on his feet, and he was following, and first impressions were important and Captain Puffy had met him of course but this would be their first “session” as he believed they were called and Ranbo wanted so badly to be good.

“We’ll wrap this up for you to have later,” Philza said, and oh right. He’d had one (1) bite of the cinnamon roll. Honestly, Ranboo wasn’t sure he would ever have the stomach to eat anything ever again. But Philza’s words and familiar voice gave Ranboo some small spark of comfort anyway.

Suddenly, intensely, he missed Eidvyrt and wished she was there.

But she wasn’t, and Ranboo had to do *right* if he ever wanted to see her again.

He gathered his coat around him a little more closely, his breath misting on the winter air. The paths were well-kept, no snow to crunch underfoot, just cold stone beneath his boots that he stared at, rather than the waking city around them or the back of the woman who would be his judge, jury, and executioner.

Well okay maybe that was a little catastrophic. Technoblade and Philza trusted her to be kind to him; she wouldn’t execute anybody.

The noise was increasing. Ranboo felt his jaw work, his tail curled in close, and swallowed compulsively around the building saliva. He wondered, distantly, almost idly, if this was some sort of... instinct to deathcall, even though he couldn’t *actually* do it. Not that he would, even if he could! Nobody was attacking him, there were no threats, just sound, people, loud and busy and crowded in a commercial area of the city, and his own private courthouse he was walking to.

Was Captain Puffy talking? She’d been talking for a while now, hadn’t she? He should listen.

He stumbled when she came to a stop in front of a small, quaint building. She unlocked it with a jiggling of keys, the iron door slow to accept the intrusion in its unused cold, but she wrangled it open with a self-satisfied “Ha!” and beckoned Ranboo inside.

“Sorry if it’s still a little dusty, I tried to hit it with a broom yesterday on my way home but it was dark and I was pretty sleepy,” Captain Puffy said, and now inside away from the crowd Ranboo could actually pick out her words from the wall of background chatter. She shrugged off her coat and draped it over the back of what looked like some sort of waiting chair? “This is technically my ‘receptionist’ desk but since I’m the only one who’s actually, yknow, here, it’s more of a glorified paper cabinet. Go ahead on into the other room, that’s the actual office.”

Ranboo watched her fiddle with drawers, muttering to herself about where she’d put “it,” and then hesitantly turned open the wooden door on his right and entered a—honestly lovely little seating area. It was pale greens and blues and beige, with a couple cushioned low-back armchairs and a side table with a bowl of what looked like toys. There was an unlit candle, thick and bearing the marks of various herbs and flowerpetals pressed inside the wax, a trashcan by the table, a jukebox in the corner, what looked like rolled up mats? And a chest near the door.

Ranboo stood awkwardly in the center of it all, unsure what to do now.

“Found it!” Captain Puffy announced loudly, making Ranboo jump, tail poofed. “Okay Enderboi, a bit of paperwork to start us off. Technically there’s no consequences if I don’t cause there’s no board of mental health professionals despite Eret’s best attempts but I like to do this anyway cause I’m ~swo perfwesional~ haha!”

Ranboo took the clipboard Captain Puffy lifted up to him, and allowed himself to be ushered towards one of the armchairs.

“Here, sit, I’m too short for you to be standing while I show you this.”

“Yes ma’am,” Ranboo breathed, his voice choked with muted fear.

“Okay so this page is the NDA, I know you’ve got a bad memory so I’ll just refresh: it states that everything discussed in therapy is confidential and I cannot speak to anybody about it without direct, uncoerced permission from you. Here’s the part where I detail the oath I took in the Church of Prime before our local doctor-priest and his signature right there. I’ve signed these already here, and you sign there. You’ll have a copy of these so you can read over them now or at your leisure whenever, up to you.”

She looked at him expectantly.

He sure did understand some of those words. But she was waiting on an answer from him. He... gathered that he was supposed to sign where she’d pointed, so he took the quill from the top of the clipboard and signed his name.

“Sounds good! Then again on my copy,” Captain Puffy prompted, and Ranboo signed again. She took the clipboard from him, pulled the first page off and set it on the side table, moved the second to the back of the small stack, and handed it back to him.

“Alright and then this is not super applicable to you, it’s a fancy receipt basically. Normally these would be my rates and scheduling stuff but since I’m helpin’ you out as a favor to Phil and Techno we’re ignoring all of that. But paper trail! So sign here again for me.”

Ranboo was glad she, for this page at least, didn’t expect him to know what he was looking at. He signed and handed her the clipboard, which she rearranged once more.

“Aaaand finally, nothing to sign here, this is just sort of a brochure of the services I provide and their intended outcomes, general information sorta stuff. That’s all yours, you can read now or later, still up to you.”

Ranboo honestly wasn’t sure what he was looking at, so. But he did know that the idea of sitting there and reading something while Captain Puffy also sat there and just *watched* him read sounded terrifying and awful! So!

“Um.” Ah, ha. Okay. That was the nausea again. Maybe speaking was not really on the table for him right now. Okay. Deep breath. Why wasn’t his chest expanding enough? He held the clipboard out for Captain Puffy, who took it, pulled the papers out, handed those back to him, and walked the clipboard over to the other chair, which she took a seat in.

Now.

Now, he had to be perfect.

At the very least: be good.

“Okay, Ranboo,” she said with a cheerful smile, clipping a notebook of her own onto the freshly-empty board. “Go ahead and put those somewhere easy to find. Now, to warn you, I’ll occasionally take notes on this notepad but that’s just so I don’t forget anything. I promise I’m not like, grading you or anything, this is a judgement-free zone.”

Well now that was just a straight up lie. Or, maybe, a poor choice in phrasing, Ranboo shouldn't call her a liar, even in his head. That was a pretty common phrase right? He put the papers in his inventory, next to his instruction book, and then curled his hands into two tight fists that he stared at as he pressed the knuckles into his thighs, the pressure not enough for his tense-strung body but the sensation too "bright" even as it was.

"As a disclaimer, and this is also mentioned in the brochure I gave you, I did not actually receive any formal training. For anything in my life! But specifically for therapy in this situation. This practice started as a scheduled weekly meetup where I forced a friend of mine to *actually talk* about his problems instead of locking them up in the Pandora's Vault inside his brain. Then I got another pair of friends into couples' counseling with me and things just sorta snowballed. I've read a lot of psychology books and texts about therapy, so it's not like I'm crapshooting, but I think it's important my clients know that I will not, in fact, be ~Strictly Professional~ about all this.

"The main thing is to find something that *helps*, whichever way we find works best."

Okay. Ranboo nodded. Most of her words didn't actually mean anything to him, even when he understood them. He just. He.

His stomach hurt so bad. He tried to take another deep breath. He couldn't get enough air.

"Do you have any questions for me before we get started?"

Get started.

Doing *what*?

Ranboo opened his mouth and that was it, the final straw, the last of his self control shattered. He lurched forward, barely making it to the trash can before his stomach emptied its meager contents.

"Oh gee! Okay, okay."

The single bite of undigested cinnamon roll rested sadly at the bottom of the bin, and Ranboo heard Captain Puffy open the chest near the door before his body heaved again, bile running rancid off his tongue and he could feel his eyes stinging, burning with tears even as his nose burned with whatever was going on in his piping.

"Eeeeasy there, here you go," Captain Puffy said, kneeling down next to Ranboo and holding out a water bottle and towel. He took them slowly, his grip fumbling with the bottle and sending it shakily down—and thankfully Captain Puffy caught it before it hit the floor and burst open and splashed all over him but—

"Sorry," Ranboo gasped, and he was fucking this up so bad already, he was fucking up he was *fucking up* and he knew he would but he couldn't he *couldn't* he had too much to lose! "Sorry, I'm sorry, I—sorry, I'm—"

"Shhhhh, hey, easy does it, here, wipe your mouth off, it's okay. It's your first day at therapy; it's normal to be nervous. Don't worry about it, it's fine."

Ranboo pressed the towel shakily against his mouth, wiping without coordination at the bile on his lips, and with another piece of the cloth he scrubbed at his eyes, taking away the stinging tears.

“It’s okay, hey, Techno said you like it when you have your hair touched right?”

Ranboo gasped around an aborted word, and nodded, hiding in the towel, and he made a frankly embarrassing noise when her hand touched his hair, needy and high, and he leaned into it.

“Easy kiddo, there you go, it’s okay,” her voice pitched up, nasal and reedy, “it’s okay, it’s okay, you’re nervous. You don’t have to feel bad, that’s just something bodies do sometimes.”

It. Almost felt like she was baby talking him? Ranboo... almost had it in him to feel offended at that.

Not actually!

But almost. Almost.

In that situation, he was halfway thankful for it, a forcible lightening of the awful mood he’d brought into her office. An example he could follow, that she wasn’t being overly serious at the moment.

“I, I can’t drink w-water,” Ranboo managed to get out, the bottle still threateningly docile in her hand.

“Huh—*oh shit!* I forgot I totally spaced my bad Ranboo my bad!” Captain Puffy got up and put the water back in the chest, and Ranboo relaxed one modicum further. Relaxation 3, Anxiety 457,439,056,795,493. Ha. Take that.

“Did that help your stomach not feel so,” Captain Puffy gestured vaguely as she went back down on one knee, and pressed her fingers into Ranboo’s hair, “whatever had been wrong with it?”

“A, a little.” Ranboo admitted, and it was maybe even the truth, possibly.

“Okay that’s good. Is there anything you need that will help this feel less scary for you?”

Ranboo tried to take a deep breath. He curled a hand over his abdomen, then raised it an inch to his diaphragm.

“May I go grab a grass block?”

“Uh.” Captain Puffy tilted her head at him, one sheep ear flopping up. “Sure, go ahead.”

“Thank you ma’am. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I’m here for *you*, we can do whatever works for you.”

“Thank you,” he mumbled, rising onto shaky legs. He had to pause, one hand leaning on the side table, and bite down a wave of combination vertigo-nausea, but he didn’t throw up again so that was good, and he skittered out of the room and out of the building at a pace just shy of a run.

Fuck, it was loud and there were people, fuck, okay, he rounded behind Puffy’s building into a small alleyway-looking stretch, too narrow for any sort of traffic (too narrow for even Technoblade, or Philza with his wings, to comfortably traverse) but Ranboo was a narrow boy, and he only needed a block’s width. He sank to his knees and dug his hands into the snow, into the dirt, and the

thing behind his diaphragm hummed and he felt the wind punched out of him, a sudden feeling of *right* socking him in the gut.

He pulled the dirt from its place, snow falling off the frozen grass stems as he moved it and the dirt crunching comfortably beneath his claws. He pressed it against his abdomen, tail curled around the block and himself, body caved in around the reassuring dirt.

Now that he felt more grounded (ha), he took a deep breath, and it actually managed to hit the back of his throat, the edges of his lungs. He took a second, and rubbed his face against the brittle grass. Okay.

Okay.

Captain Puffy hadn't seemed mad about the—vomit, so that was good. Probably. She wouldn't—she wouldn't lie to him, would she? About how he was doing? She wouldn't pretend not to be mad, just to get his guard down? She wouldn't trick him into failure, right? She said she wanted to help. Philza and Technoblade believed that she *would* help. Maybe, maybe it could even be a good thing, that his stupid brain and stupid body weren't cooperating right here at the start: he could show her how much better he was doing over the course of the upcoming weeks, and she could say he was making really fast progress and she wouldn't need to take over for Philza and Technoblade.

Even in his own head, his optimism felt fragile and naive.

He made himself stand, grass block held against his belly, and scurried back around the building and inside. He could only imagine that every single person on that street was looking at him, the tall spindly freak carrying around a random clump of dirt.

No wonder he needed his brain fixed.

But it *did* help.

“Hey, feeling better?”

Ranboo made himself nod, and he was even telling the truth! Okay. Okay, they could start. They could begin—whatever this would be. Oh god. Okay. Fuck. Okay!

“Umm, I won't—get dirt on your chair, it's, I'll just—” He knelt, block held in his lap, arms wrapped around the dirt, and he noticed that the lining of the trash can had been changed. He felt awful for making her deal with that, but grateful, at least, that there hadn't been much to come up.

“That's fine!” Captain Puffy said, keeping her ever-present cheer, and Ranboo swallowed harshly around the acid taste still left in his mouth as she dropped a pillow from her armchair onto the floor, and then took a seat across from him.

This was. Probably fine.

“So let me know if there's anything you need to make this less scary for you, or if there are ever any questions you have at any point.”

Ranboo started to nod, then paused. “Um.”

“Go ahead,” she encouraged.

“What...” Ranboo tightened around the grass block in his lap, tail locked flat against it. She nodded at him, smiling, and he swallowed again. “What’s going to happen to me?”

Captain Puffy looked first blank, then confused, then concerned.

“You mean, here?”

Ranboo nodded, head down, body too tense to shake.

“Ranboo, has anyone explained to you what therapy is?”

Ranboo bit his lip. “You’re... you’re going to fix me? And—tell Technoblade and Philza what they need to do, to fix me?”

“Okay, so while that’s not an unfounded guess, no. That’s not what therapy is.”

“Ah?”

“I’m going to *help* you,” Captain Puffy explained, her voice pressing against the wall of Ranboo’s nerves. “Therapy is a form of medicine; it’s a healing practice focused on the mind. Traumatic events—okay, let me know if I’m using words or terms you’re unfamiliar with, to start. Interrupt me or just like, raise your hand to get my attention if I ever bring up something where you don’t know what it means, okay?”

Ranboo would not be interrupting her. Raising his hand, though, that he could probably do. He—probably, yeah.

He tried it out, hesitantly lifting his hand from the grass block.

“Yes, Ranboo,” Captain Puffy prompted with a smile.

“Um, ‘traumatic,’ that means, something really upsetting, right?”

“Mhm. Something distressing that leaves a lasting mark. When traumatic stuff happens, it can fuck you up long-term, and it doesn’t always heal on its own like physical scratches do. Sometimes you need medical intervention.

“You’ve been through a lot.” Ranboo squirmed, looking away to the side, tail tip twitching at her words. “It wasn’t fair, and it wasn’t right, and it hurt you. It left you with skewed understandings of how you’re supposed to be treated and the appropriate way to act. That’s not bad, I should clarify, it’s not a bad thing that you think and feel the way you do, or you have the expectations that you have. Just that they’re a product of something pretty bleeped up, and I can help you learn new ways of engaging with the world, and help heal some of the stuff that’s messed with your head.

“It bears repeating that I am here to *help*, but what happens is ultimately up to you and what you decide. This is *your* mind and your actions.

“Most of what we do here is talking. I have some grounding exercises and some physical exercises that can help, but talking is going to be the brunt of it.”

“Talking—?” Ranboo repeated, half a question.

“Yup! Just talking. Airing your thoughts and discussing them. Some guidance and suggestions on my part, and we’ll develop a game plan for you regarding whatever your personal goals are. You set the goals, Ranboo, and I’ll provide the tools and framework to meet them. To help *you* meet *your* goals.”

“A-ah.”

“Hey,” she said, softer, lower, and Ranboo forced his eyes to skitter over to her boots, criss crossed off the pillow she was seated on. “All I’m asking you to do is speak honestly and give it your best shot, okay? That’s literally all I need from you, is to try.”

I’m trying.

“So, so, if I—if I’m not—” Ranboo couldn’t speak, his words failed him, and he rocked forward over the block and that felt good and right in his brain so he kept rocking, head down and tail close and fingers digging into the reassuring texture of half-frozen dirt. “Are you going to make me leave?” he blurted, which was needy, desperate, he was acting wrong all wrong but from what she’d said maybe he wasn’t actually and maybe she wouldn’t, maybe he could stay, maybe she’d let him go home even if he still acted like a slave.

“No honey, I’m not gonna make you leave. Are you worried about doing ‘well’ in therapy or I’ll kick you out?”

“Ah, hmm, no,” Ranboo let out a vocalization that was probably a little too distressed, given how the wool on Captain Puffy’s legs stood on end at the sound, “I, Technoblade and Philza, are you going to make me leave them?”

“Uhhhhh, no!?! Absolutely not???” Captain Puffy leaned forward and set a hand on top of Ranboo’s, and that felt nice in his brain, and he should probably stop rocking but he couldn’t bring himself to. Ha. He really did probably look insane, didn’t he? “Hey, Ranboo, talk me through this okay? What made you think I’d make you leave Techno and Phil?”

“I—they—When Technoblade first saved me, Philza said—” Ranboo forced a deep breath, digging his claws into the dirt, and then he set it down on the carpet in front of him to pull out his memory book, Captain Puffy retracting her hand. “They—they said that they weren’t, um, that maybe, I should live with somebody else, since I’m,” Ranboo gestured agitatedly at his head, “broken, a-and Philza said I had to do therapy, as, as one of the conditions of me living with them instead. And, and you—I’m sure you’re very nice but please I don’t want to live with you I don’t want to leave my home there I’m scared and I want to prove that I can do this but I’m—”

“Shhhhhhhshshshs, hey hey hey, sh sh sh, hey,” Captain Puffy cut him off, her small hands petting at his face and hair, and he keened and lurched haphazardly into the touch. “Woah boy, slow down. You’re not going to live with me.”

“I’m not?” he gasped.

“Noooo way. That was not something that Techno or Phil *ever* brought up with me. I would need way more forewarning—and also, y’know, to agree to it—if that was ever gonna be an option. Nuh-uh buddy. You’re just here to talk with me okay? We’re just talking, I’m gonna give you some tips and tricks, nobody’s living arrangements are getting mixed around. I mean, okay, you’re living with me right *now* cause you’re in town and they’ve got bombs to ‘splode out west, but that is *decidedly* temporary.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah.” Ah. “Okay.” Okay. “A-ah...”

“Oh honey, is that what's got you so stressed? You thought you were gonna have to leave?” Her small hands pet at his hair and cheek and he whined, high and frail and small and feeling a relief too large to believe in the existence of, his shattered mind slow on the uptake that he was—

Okay?

They hadn't even brought it up with her. From the sound of it, she might not have told them yes, even if they had. It wasn't an option. Somewhere along the line, between Philza walking through the door with clothes soaked in blood and Ranboo starting to sleepwalk, somewhere, sometime, they'd decided against sending him away.

No no no no no he didn't want to cry he didn't want to cry he didn't want to cry.

“Easy, shhhh, let it out.”

“I—crying, burns.”

“Right! Right, right, water, shoot, I keep forgetting that, my bad!”

Ranboo laughed, first a little bitter, then it turned halfway hysterical (okay, maybe calling it “halfway” was being overly generous with himself).

“Aw, hey buddy,” Captain Puffy said as she patted him on the back, fingers still petting through his hair. “It's okay.”

And Ranboo just laughed harder, because it was? It actually was? They weren't going to make him leave? They weren't going to discern if he was acting free *enough*? They were just—talking? Healing? Healing him? Through talking? The witch's potions option wasn't entirely ruled out, to be honest, but. But.

“I'll get to go home?” and his voice was too high and too wet and he didn't want to cry he *didn't* it burned and he was trying so hard not to.

“You're going to go home,” Captain Puffy confirmed. “You're not gonna stay with me for more than a couple weeks. Techno and Phil aren't abandoning you. They wouldn't let me keep you even if I wanted to.” She ruffled his hair. “They love you a lot and care about you. No stickin' around for the Enderboi.”

Ranboo pressed his forehead into the dirt, chest juttering with shaking breaths. Captain Puffy pat his back.

“Thank you.”

“Take your time buddy. Take it easy. That must've been a really hard thing for you to carry. It's okay if you need to take a breather.”

A breather, and they hadn't even technically started.

But oh, the most important thing—the *only* thing he'd actually set out to do—ensuring that he would get to go *home*—

He swiped at his eyes, catching tears on his sleeve.

He would get to go home, and they hadn't even thought he was going to stay here in the first place. Never before had he been so relieved by having the wrong information. *Never* had he been so happy to be wrong.

"Hey, deep breaths," Captain Puffy soothed, and Ranboo tried, taking slow breaths, but his hunched position didn't really facilitate deep ones. A chest opened. He hesitantly straightened, lifting off the block, and let out a sharp vocalization when something not-hand-shaped hit his back.

Oh. A blanket. It had startled him. He lifted a hand to grab at the edge, pulling it around his shoulder, and looked up at the captain as she rounded back in front of him.

"Easy does it Mister Ranboo. What would help, right now? Or do you just need a minute?"

"I, I'm. I'm—" He closed his eyes and tried to breathe. "I'm just. Relieved."

Captain Puffy nodded. "Yeah, sounds like one hell of a misunderstanding." Captain Puffy tilted her head at him. "And let me know if you need a minute still, but Ranboo, did you think Techno or Phil wanted you to leave? Or what was going on there?"

Ranboo shook his head, scrubbing again at a stinging eye with his sleeve cuff. "They didn't want me to leave. They wanted, a-and, expected, me, to stay, which makes sense in hindsight, now that you've said that. But." Ranboo took a shuddering breath. "But. When Philza brought it up, the first time, he said, he said," Ranboo's memory was hazy, uncertain, "he said he didn't want me to leave, but he wanted to do what was best for me, even if that meant, meant sending me to other people wh-who could do better."

"Okay, okay I think I understand. And you weren't aware they'd decided against that?"

Ranboo nodded. He felt like his chest had been opened like a set of double doors, that now hung swinging off their hinges. Like the relief was all just pouring out of him like honey out the bottom of a comb.

"Well gee no wonder you were terrified of this," Captain Puffy remarked, leaning forward to set her chin in her palm and her elbow on her crossed legs. Ranboo felt another less-than-totally-sane laugh bubble out of him. He hugged the grass block closer, tail uncurling slightly, then lashing out behind him and twitching with jitters, and Captain Puffy noted something down on her clipboard but otherwise waited patiently for Ranboo to pick himself back together.

He took a deep breath.

"So, so, what, do we talk about?" Ranboo asked, what might have been hours later, for all he knew.

"Well, you, mostly! First session is usually just me getting a feel for you, and you expressing what you feel your target areas are, and what goals you have. If you don't have goals, don't worry, we can talk it out and I could give you some suggestions."

"Suggestions, w-would be nice."

“We can do that! And I feel it’s probably relevant: goals are not permanent. They can change or get abandoned altogether if that’s the way things move and groove here. Don’t take any of this as like, written-in-stone okay? Chances are *very* good we’re going to try out quite a few things that don’t actually work as we’re figuring out the stuff that does, that’s fine, that’s normal, that’s okay.”

“Okay.”

“Especially since we’re early on, we’re just getting a feel for it at first. We don’t need to get it perfect first try.”

Ranboo pressed his lips together. “Um. Is that. A goal, I could, uh, suggest, maybe?”

“Hm?”

“N-not getting it, perfect, first try...”

“Oh, you suffer from high, high self-imposed expectations?”

Well, Ranboo sure felt like that was a good term for it. He nodded, eyes skittering away.

“Does that have something to do with you being a slave, before?”

Ranboo nodded again. That seemed likely.

“Alright. We’ll talk about that. But for now: tell me about yourself, Ranboo.”

“Um.” He never knew how to answer that. “I’m. Half Enderman. I’m tall, and water burns me. I like animals.”

“Oh? Do you have any back home?”

Ranboo straightened, ears perking and tail flicking up. “Oh! Yes! I have, um, well, Technoblade and Philza have animals, too, but I have, two cows, named Ranmoo and Bob, and I have three cats. Enderchest, is the mama cat, a-and I found her as a stray, near our cabin, and Enderpearl and Jjjjjjeffery are her babies.” His fingers flexed against the grass block, his tail tip bapping against the carpet. “They’re, still kittens, but they’re old enough that we could leave them on their own now. Enderchest doesn’t, doesn’t like very many people, but she warmed up to me, and she trusts me now, and that feels really amazing. Enderpearl is, she’s sneaky and mischievous, and she’s all black, like her mama. And Jjjjjjeffery is curious, and very talkative, and he’s got white socks, and I also have a rabbit named Ranbun that I only got kind of recently before we left and I don’t know how to tell genders—um, kind of in general, but, especially for rabbits, so I call them they/them, a-and they’re black and white, like me.”

It occurred to Ranboo that he’d been talking without break for far too long, and shut his mouth with a small click of his teeth.

“That’s quite a few! It sounds like you really care about them,” Captain Puffy prompted, and Ranboo’s tail tip hesitantly flicked again.

“I, I do. I, try my hardest to take very good care of them.”

“That’s good! That’s good. It’s worth noting that having other living entities to care for, from pets to plants to even just local birds at your bird feeder, can be really helpful in some people’s healing

process. I think that's great that you've got so many critters for you to watch out for and love on."

Ranboo beamed. He did good??? He did good?!?!

"Why don't you tell me a little more about what it's like living with Techno and Phil?"

So Ranboo told her about mining and the stewpot and the big bed upstairs. And he told her about Eidvyr and Wilbur and Fundy and how he was learning about Endermen and his trip to the city. And he talked about how Technoblade would hold him and how Philza liked to laugh and he didn't really realize how the words grew less hesitant as he talked, or just how *much* he was saying, sentence after sentence and paragraph after paragraph coaxed out of him with her friendly smiles and interested prompting. Relief made him giddy, loose-lipped, his words lighter and detached from any kind of reality until she shifted on the pillow from criss-cross to ankles out to the side and he was reminded that they were occupying a physical space.

"Okay, I think this was a great introduction, but we gotta hit a couple bullet points before we wrap up today."

Right. They were, right, right, supposed to be giving Ranboo goals.

"So I know today was mostly just me getting to know you, but do you have anything you'd like to cover, during therapy? Anything specific you wanna work through, or topics you want to make sure we talk about? Other than the high standards we mentioned earlier."

"Um." He'd honestly not thought about it. Hell, that very morning he'd come in here thinking she was going to rearrange his brain (the potions idea was still rattling around in his head, not gonna lie). "I, I guess. Um. I'm, supposed to act like a free person? S-so, if you, tools, or, tips, for, how to do that?" And he was stuttering again, once more self-conscious and aware that Captain Puffy was supposed to be *doing* something to him.

Captain Puffy wrote something down. "Okay, so we will *definitely* be talking about that. Good for me to know. Anything else?"

"Um." Oh! The thing that had prompted all this! "I started, sleepwalking? Recently? A-and Technoblade thinks, it might be related to," Ranboo waved at his head vaguely, "my problems?"

"Sleepwalking, possibly trauma induced," Captain Puffy mumbled as she wrote. "Okay! Great stuff so far, good job."

Ranboo warmed, smiling under her encouraging praise.

"I. Um. You, you said, you said earlier, that you wouldn't, um, you can't tell Technoblade or Philza about therapy unless I give permission?"

"That's right. Unless you tell me, 'Hey Puffy it's okay for you to tell This Person about This Thing,' I cannot bring up anything you've told me in therapy outside of therapy. Now, since this isn't just business and you DO live with me right now and we ARE friends outside of therapy, that might be a little trickier with like, the day-to-day stuff. But I promise I will be giving it my 100%."

Ranboo nodded, and squirmed nervously, claws flexing against the dirt block.

“Um. I have.” Ranboo swallowed. But if he really was going home no matter what, and if she really couldn’t talk about it... “I have, bad thoughts.”

“I, I know, I’ve been doing, better,” he rushed to explain, “about acting like a free person, and, and I don’t *think*, I’ve been bothering Technoblade and Philza with it, as much. But, but I have.” Ranboo curled around the grass block again, tail pulling in. “I have these, so many, *wants*, and I know it’s not how free people think and I know it’s not how free people act so I don’t, I don’t bring them up, and I don’t—I try not to do them, but I keep wanting, and acting like a slave, and I don’t want to have these thoughts because I know I *shouldn’t* but I keep thinking them anyway and could you, could, you make me stop?”

When he looked up, Captain Puffy was writing, her lip pulled between her blunt teeth.

“Alright, another thing we will definitely be talking about.”

Ranboo nodded. “I think, I think that’s all that, I, um, wait, do you... know any ways to make my memory better?”

“Forgetfulness *can* be a trauma response. Ideally, in that case, the safer you feel and the more you process your emotions, the less memory problems you’re gonna see. Some people have worse memories than others, just naturally, and if it’s related to any kind of physical injury or condition you’d need to talk to a doctor.”

Ranboo nodded. So, maybe a little bit, then?

“I think, that’s all, that I can think of.”

“Okay! And again, we’ll dig up more stuff to talk about as we go. This is just sort of my starting place. Now, I know that Phil and Techno were hoping that I could help them help you, you knew about that?”

Ranboo nodded.

“So since I can’t talk to them about what gets said in therapy without your permission, I’d appreciate it if you could think over what we talked about today and pick out anything you’d be okay with me talking to them about? If your answer is ‘nothing’ that’s fine, I’ll keep it as vague as I need to, but since you love and trust them I figure you’d be okay if I share some stuff.”

“You can, you can tell them about, everything except me having bad thoughts?” Ranboo scratched at the grass block, but stopped when he saw little pills of dirt hit her nice carpet. Dirty boy. Messy boy. “I, I don’t, want them to know about that. But everything else, they, already know? Like, my pets, or Eidvyr, they, they know about all of that.”

“Okay, so if I have conversations with them about...” Captain Puffy wrote something down real quick, “you thought you might have to leave, the two of them make you feel safe, you respond well to touch and desire praise, you like people but struggle to connect to new ones, you feel the need to ‘act free,’ have high internally set expectations for yourself, and you’re concerned about sleepwalking; if I talk to them about any of that, that’s okay?”

Ranboo nodded. He’d forgotten that him not-leaving was a mutual misunderstanding. “Just, just not the bad thoughts part.”

“Not that part,” Captain Puffy confirmed, and Ranboo offered her a small smile. “And, and it’s not, really, that I’m con—well, um, I—” Oh, why’d he opened up his big mouth? It wasn’t like the distinction made any difference.

“Go ahead,” she prompted brightly, head tilted so her ear flopped up again. It was. Kind of really endearing.

“It’s not that I’m concerned about the sleepwalking? I guess, I don’t really have any strong feelings about it. But, um, Technoblade and Philza think it’s something, I should bring up with you?”

“Okay, I’ll note that down,” Captain Puffy said, making good on her words even as she spoke them. Lifting her quill, she asked. “Okay! Anything else you’d like to say before we wrap up today’s session?”

Ranboo shook his head. Oh, but. “Do you want me to put the grass block back where I found it?”

“Sure. You can go grab it again tomorrow if you need it.”

Ranboo smiled at that, and then hopped up onto his feet to go do that. Much slower, Captain Puffy made her way up off the pillow and onto her hooves. She was still stretching out her back when Ranboo hurried back in, and he felt bad. She’d only been on the floor because he was on the floor.

Admittedly, he was 99% sure it had worked the way she wanted it to and helped him calm down.

“Sorry,” he murmured anyway.

Captain Puffy waved him off. “I’m just getting old, is all. Ha! Maybe I should get used to that idea though. I should introduce you to my grandson sometime, which will probably happen, since I babysit for Foolish while I’m in town anyway.”

“I would like that,” Ranboo said quietly, thinking of Fundy.

“Alright, lemme go grab my coat and we can head out. Do you wanna pick up something to eat on the way home? We ran pretty long, and I am starving!”

“Um, whatever you’d prefer,” Ranboo said hesitantly. Honestly, he could eat. He hadn’t all day.

Throwing one last look at the room behind him, bright colors catching his eye, he followed Captain Puffy into the reception area and then out the door, watching her fuss with the lock again on their way out.

“Um, ma’am?”

“Yeah?”

“What is, the bowl of toys in your office for?”

“Oh! Those are stim toys. They—yes?”

Ranboo lowered his hand back down. “What’s a stim toy? Or, I guess, just, stim?” He knew what toys were, it was just the one word that was foreign to him.

“Stim is short for stimulation. Stim toys are fidget toys, or tools. They give people something to occupy their hands while they’re talking, or to focus on or look at during conversations that are uncomfortable. In a less-therapeutic and more-general sense, they help people focus by channelling excess energy, letting people fidget it out, or by helping someone overwhelmed ground themselves, giving tactile stimulation to center on.”

“Oh.” That sounded. *Really* nice. “And, your, patients?”

“Yup! The bowl is there for my patients. You can fiddle with them tomorrow if you want. I think I have a rainbow tangle back home in with Jr.’s toys somewhere, too.”

Ranboo’s ears perked up, tail lifting, but remained quiet as he followed Captain Puffy through the streets. It was still loud, and crowded, and noisy, and bright, and the snow reflecting the sunlight just made it brighter, and Ranboo’s boots clicked with unfamiliar loudness against the stone path, and now there were *smells* added into the mix, and Ranboo wasn’t paying great attention when Captain Puffy handed him a bowl with steaming noodles and takoyaki balls. Fortunately, she wasn’t particularly rushed, and he had a firm grip of it before she let go.

It tasted really good.

The crowd faded away quickly. Captain Puffy’s office seemed to be on the outer ring of the commercial, central area of the city, and fortunately none of it had been as bad as when they’d walked through the portal into the hub. Even so, Ranboo found that between eating for the first time all day, the relief of not having to stay here even if he wasn’t perfect, having spent hours talking about himself, and the noisy cold outdoors, he was rather looking forward to the idea of getting to sit down somewhere quiet for a little while. Maybe, if Technoblade wasn’t too busy, Ranboo could curl up against his side under his cape and fade into the background for a little while.

That could be nice.

Captain Puffy took Ranboo’s trash from him when he finished eating and popped it in her trash can before they entered her house, Ranboo brushing his boots off on her welcome mat after observing her shuffle her hooves on it.

“Hey boys,” Captain Puffy greeted as they entered, and Philza and Technoblade looked up from Captain Puffy’s table and—Niki’s receipts? That were spread out? Around a map? And a notebook that Technoblade quickly closed and sent everything into his inventory?

Ranboo wasn’t going to bring it up.

“Hallooo; you were gone a while,” Technoblade said, getting up and walking to Ranboo. He didn’t seem concerned or even overly curious, just mildly inquisitive. Max, meanwhile, seemed delighted Ranboo was back, and hopped around his ankles happily.

“We talked about a lot of stuff!” Captain Puffy agreed, and Ranboo leaned forward, vwooping happily when Technoblade pulled him in for a hug, tail flicking out behind him.

“We’ll pay you for the extra time as well,” Philza remarked, making Captain Puffy raspberry loudly.

“Absolutely not! Everything you two have done for me, I won’t accept an emerald.”

“Puffy you can’t just *not* let us pay you!” Philza argued, and the two of them set into it.

“Was it as bad as you thought?” Technoblade asked, quiet and low in Ranboo’s ear, and Ranboo shook his head.

“No, um, she said—she said, that you never brought up, me living with her? To her. She, you never talked to her about it?”

“Nahhh, nah nah nah. We decided against that way back when, no reason to mention it.”

Ranboo beamed, tail wagging and ears upright, a happy little trail of vwoops reverberating in his throat.

Technoblade, however, frowned minutely. “Waiiiiiit, wait wait wait, was that what had you so freaked out lately?”

Ranboo nodded, “Yeah, but, but she said, that nobody had, since nobody brought it up that meant it wasn’t an option anymore? And we’re just talking, and then you’ll take me home?” His tail paused hopefully, wanting Technoblade’s confirmation.

“I mean *obviously* yeah!” Ranboo vwooped again and buried his face in Technoblade’s cape, tail wagging and accidentally bumping into the wall behind him more than once. “I mean if that’s what you’ve been thinking then no wonder you’ve been stressed!” Technoblade’s voice was doing the pitch-up thing it sometimes did, then dropped back down. “Bro. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I, I didn’t know you, I thought, we were on the same page.”

Technoblade sighed, a warm hand rubbing up and down Ranboo’s back, a strong arm encircling his small waist and keeping him hugged close. “Yeah, that’s always the issue huh? We don’t know what other people are thinking.”

But Ranboo would get to go home. He would get to keep this. He would get to see Eidvyr and his cats and his cows and his rabbit again, he would be safe and warm and held even if he fucked therapy up. He would get to go home.

And right then, that joy was the only thing that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

We’re gonna reach the end of this eventually I promise. Just stick with me a little longer my brain has too many Ideas.

As always, comments/concrit/feedback of any sort is delightful and welcomed.

Also I dunno if you all saw but I HAVE FANFIC! It’s linked in the end notes. Y’all go read House of Memories it’s fun.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He woke up with his head pillowed on Technoblade's thigh. That was weird. Normally he woke up against Technoblade's chest, laying down, because they slept laying down, but Technoblade was sitting *up* which was the opposite of down. Philza was sitting in front of them, and ah. Ranboo had fallen asleep on the couch.

Guess he was more tired than he'd thought.

Technoblade's fingers were in Philza's feathers, slowly brushing through them, straightening the vanes and laying them flat together, occasionally tugging on the shaft of a feather that had come loose and pulling it gently from the inky void surrounding it. Seated there, Philza was doing much the same on the interior of his wing. There were two small piles of feathers on the floor, Philza's wing cozy draped over his thigh, and the room was quiet save for the crackling of a nearby fireplace.

Ranboo squirmed, feeling almost like by waking, he was now intruding.

"You're up," Technoblade mentioned, and Philza twisted. Ranboo lifted himself up off Technoblade's thigh, blinking and taking in his surroundings—right, Captain Puffy's house—and Philza and Technoblade put the wing cozy back on.

"I fell asleep," Ranboo mentioned in return, and Philza chuckled while Technoblade snorted.

"Yeah. You've been pretty high-strung lately, it figures."

It also meant Ranboo would probably take a while to fall asleep that night but that would be okay.

"Hey, when—oh!" Captain Puffy's voice started at a whisper, but she flipped back to her boisterous self when she saw Ranboo sitting up, "Sweet, dinner's ready."

"Pog timing," Philza remarked mildly, standing up and sounding... sorta sleepy? Not, like, tired, just sort of content and warm and not-perky. The opposite of perky. He flapped his wings briefly and shook himself, giving Twitch a happy whistle when they flew over and landed on his wrist.

A big black wing wrapped in wool folded over Ranboo's shoulder and pulled him in closer to Philza. "Techno tells me you thought we were gonna make you stay here?"

Ranboo nodded, tail thrashing at the memory. "Yes, but, Captain Puffy said that wasn't, that wasn't an option, anymore, cause you never brought it up with her."

"It was never an option. Only way back at the very start when Techno and I didn't know what we were doing and weren't sure we could give you the help you needed. Never since."

Ranboo trilled happily, tail wagging, and reached down to squeeze Philza's hand with one of his own.

"I'm glad," Ranboo said, still waking up and still *so* relieved and feeling kind of giddy.

Philza's free hand reached up and cupped Ranboo's cheek, making him vwoop quietly. "Anything else bangin' around in that head of yours that we don't know about?"

Ranboo shook his head. "I don't think so, sir."

"Okay. Well let us know if you've got concerns, alright? And call me Phil."

"Alright, and no sir."

Philza snorted and his wing released him, and the four of them had dinner, each of the guests giving Captain Puffy their thanks and praise for feeding them. She waved them off each time, but clearly enjoyed the compliments.

After dinner, the three of them taught Ranboo how to play euchre, and Ranboo got to team up with Technoblade for it which was pretty excellent, even though Technoblade got reliably the worst hands and their team always lost. Ranboo didn't mind losing, and got to chuckle along with Philza and Captain Puffy whenever Technoblade complained.

Admittedly, they found out halfway through the third round that Philza was using Twitch to spy on everyone else's hands, which resulted in a small and friendly scuffle, so that could be part of why they lost so much, but also, such was the luck of the draw.

After games, Technoblade took care of Carl, Ranboo received many kisses from Max (who in return received many pets), and then they went to bed, Ranboo finding it surprisingly easy to drop off despite his nap.

The next morning, his cinnamon roll sat before him, innocent and reheated, and it tasted divine.

The walk through the city to Captain Puffy's office wasn't nearly so loud, the second day. Or maybe, Ranboo just wasn't as bothered by the noise. He tentatively draped his coat next to hers, over the back of the waiting room chair, and tried to listen attentively as she led him back into the pale room.

"Alright, so on the subject of me being old and you being anxious and us not having any kind of time restraints here, we're doing yoga."

Ranboo raised his hand.

"Yes sweetie?"

"What's yoga?"

"It's an athletic form, stretching mostly. There's two kinds—well, I, maybe more, I dunno, I only know about the two. There's like, active yoga, which. Gonna be honest, I don't know anything about. And then there's restorative yoga, and that's what we're gonna do! Restorative yoga is very slow and soothing, it's focused on stretching you out and relaxing you, so!" Captain Puffy handed him one of the rolled up mats, "Pick a spot; make sure you have room to stretch your arms out to the sides!

"Restorative yoga centers itself on the breath, so a lot of what we're gonna do is breathe deeply and slowly in assorted positions, but it's also good for when you've got back pain or tension. Which." Captain Puffy gestured vaguely to all of Ranboo. "You've got so much bleepin tension."

“I do.”

Captain Puffy snorted and struck a match, then lit the candle. She waved the match out once the wick had caught. “A joke you may hear—or honestly you might not, I might be the only person you ever hear make this joke—is that trauma is stored in the hips. It’s cause hip tension genuinely does increase with traumatic stressors. So! We’re gonna stretch out my old man back and your ex-slave hips.”

“Okay,” Ranboo said, sitting tentatively down on the thin mat he’d unrolled. He couldn’t say if his hips were tight or not. It seemed to him that his hips were the same as they’d always been. He was long, and noodly, and fairly flexible in comparison to most humans and hybrids, though he couldn’t say how well his flexibility compared regarding an Enderman, or whatever else the other half of him was.

Either way, it seemed like “restorative yoga” could be nice? If nothing else, it didn’t sound like it’d be awful, and Captain Puffy would be doing it with him so that must mean it was something regular people would voluntarily do. Well, okay, she *was* considerably more athletic than he was, judging by the sight of her seafaring arms and powerful sheep legs, and the fact that he was Particularly Twiggy, but even so! Relaxing stretching with deep breathing sounded nice. Yeah, this should be good. Mhm, this should be good.

Captain Puffy’s ear flick-flick-flicked in his direction and she smiled, down on one knee and digging through her chest near the door.

Ah. He was. Vocalizing. She didn’t seem to mind?

“So once upon a time I could do this just by listening to the beats of the music, I had this whole routine, but I’ve been halfway across the globe since then, so! Notes time,” she said, triumphantly pulling a worn notebook from the chest. “We’ll see if I remember which part of the music signals a position shift.” She crossed to the jukebox in the corner, pulling a teal-centered disc from behind it and popping it into the slot. The thing whirred to life, a faint glow of redstone in its inner mechanisms emanating from the slot on top and some of the criss-crossed patterning along the sides.

“Shoes off! Any questions before we get started?”

Ranboo didn’t even know what he wouldn’t know. “Um. I just, follow your lead?” he asked as he set his shoes aside the door.

“Yup! And I’ll read the instructions out loud, don’t worry, you just try to relax and de-tensify yourself.” Captain Puffy poked his cheek with a “boop!” and said, in that weird half-babytalk of hers, “You’we awl wound up and stwessed out!”

“I am,” Ranboo agreed, though he didn’t feel overtly stressed at the moment. Still, in general, generally speaking, that was usually the case. Ranboo would be hard pressed to find something he *couldn’t* stress himself out over. Maybe—no, no, he could stress himself out over that too.

Well, the upside was, the lady who was going to help-him-not-fix-his-brain-but-improve-him-somehow-anyway-through-talking had a fair assessment of him! That was probably a good thing.

“Alright so we’re going to start out in—actually, maybe child’s pose would not be a great idea for you. We’ll start out flat on our backs, get our spines nice and straight.”

From the jukebox, light chiming over a long, slow violin? Violin-esque-instrument? Started to sound. Ranboo mimicked her, laying out flat on his back with his arms down at his sides and his legs down and loose. He was too long for the mat. That was fine, though, he was wearing pants and socks and he doubted the carpet would be too terrible a texture even if his skin was touching it.

Hm. Interestingly enough, laid out flat like this, Ranboo became... suddenly *much* more aware of the fact that it was actually super difficult for him to get the muscles in his neck to relax. Kind of. Actually sorta impossible. The place where his skull met his neck just. Wouldn't unclench? Even though he was laying down and didn't need to prevent any falling or anything. Hm.

Okay.

His spine also felt sorta weird, like this. He wasn't used to it being all. Long.

Oh. Something in his lower back popped. Just from laying down on the floor??? He guessed that was probably Captain Puffy's intention. He tried to think about his hips. Were they tight? They didn't feel tight. They felt pretty normal.

"And we're taking long, slow breaths," Captain Puffy reminded, and Ranboo tilted an ear up and keyed into her breathing, following her rhythm.

Did sheep have bigger lungs than Endermen? Did humans have slower breaths than—whatever Ranboo was? Or was he simply not used to it, the lethargic pace at which Captain Puffy breathed?

"Okay, now we're gonna keep our shoulders flat on the mat, but we're gonna lift a knee up and hug it to our chest, yup, like that."

Okay, Ranboo felt that stretch. He actually got his knee closer to his chest than Captain Puffy did, which he felt vaguely proud of. Haha, noodle boy wins.

Well, not win, there probably wasn't winning in yoga. Or therapy. Though, what would Ranboo know? At least with Captain Puffy, there probably wasn't any competition here. He tried to copy her breathing. Captain Puffy was definitely winning the breathing thing. Except, again, probably no winners in therapy. Or yoga.

When she had him twist his hips, leaving his shoulders on the mat, and stretch that way, he *felt* that.

Ahahaha. Trauma in the hips.

Ranboo continued to mimic Captain Puffy throughout the rest of the stretches, some of the positions feeling more intense than others. The breathing thing was hard to keep pace on, but if his mind started to wander she would very cheerfully remind him, and he felt bad each time she did but she never *sounded* upset at least.

Interestingly enough, when she had him go back to laying flat on his back, some 20 or 30 minutes later, he... found he had an easier time relaxing. His neck was still something of a lost cause, but his back didn't feel so awkward against the flat surface and his tail was flicking with lazy contentedness.

The room smelled nice. Floral, and kind of earthy. Probably the candle. The music was nice too, calm and slow and lyricless, with occasional wind chimes and Ranboo was pretty sure the sound of running water was coming from the jukebox, too.

Huh. He felt. Kinda good. At the very least, definitely more relaxed than he'd started, which was saying something, since he'd started that morning already way more relaxed than he'd been ever since they'd first called Captain Puffy over the communicators.

"Annnnd sit up slowly, try to roll through the body rather than pull on it," Captain Puffy finished, and then she also rose up onto her hooves which meant Ranboo naturally got on his feet as well, watching after her as she popped the disc out of the jukebox and set it back behind it, and put her notebook away in the chest by the door. He copied her as she rolled the mat up, and handed his to her when she extended a hand his way.

"Now, onto the actual talking part of our talk therapy sessions," she said, and Ranboo glanced at his shoes.

"Should I, uh, put those back on?"

"If that makes you more comfortable, then absolutely."

Well.

It wouldn't make him *less* comfortable, so.

He slipped back into his shoes, seated on the lowback armchair he'd briefly inhabited the day before, and stretched like he'd seen Antfrost do, all curvy-spined and stretched out fingers. He sat up with a flick of his tail, and supposed now was about the time he should start to feel nervous. They were going to not-fix-but-help him now, right?

Huh.

Maybe... maybe he could ask Captain Puffy about borrowing her yoga notebook for a bit, and copying the routine down in his instruction book. That. Seemed to actually really help? And, and something, in his head, something about routines, and long-term effects having greater yield than initial something something. He was pretty sure he'd heard that before, yeah. Something like it.

"Okey-dokey. So, to start, is there anything you'd like to talk about specifically, today?"

"Uh." Ranboo thought about that. "I guess, um, you'd mentioned, some stuff yesterday? That we should talk about?"

He could recall that they had, she'd written stuff down, he just... couldn't remember exactly *what* she'd written down. Haha. And he couldn't check his memory book because it was in *her* notebook.

"Alrighty. So, what I was hoping to discuss today was maybe a little bit of your past life, before Techno and Phil, and what your situation looked like there. More concretely, I also wanted to discuss your high expectations for yourself, that you feel the need to 'act' like a free person, your communication issues, and probably tomorrow or the day after we'll go ahead and dive into your 'bad' thoughts and maybe potentially the sleepwalking thing.

"Actually," Captain Puffy looked up from her notebook, "How often does the sleepwalking thing even happen?"

"Um. Just the once."

“Okay, so I’m gonna go ahead and mark that as low priority.”

“That makes sense.”

Captain Puffy wrote something down. Ranboo looked over at the table, and his eye caught on a colorful... thing.

“Ma’am?”

“Yeah hon?”

“You said, I could, um, fidget with these?”

“Oh, go ahead! Yeah, just try not to take them out of my office, other than that do whatever you’d like. Okay, except breaking them, but I don’t think you’re the type.”

Ranboo wasn’t. And if he did, he would never touch any of them ever again. He took a wavy, rainbow, squiggly oval and it flip-flopped about in his hands, the curves of the interlocking pieces making it move in curious ways.

He. Liked that.

“Um. Could we, maybe, start with—if it’s okay—”

“It is.”

“I. You said, that, you could give, um, tips?”

“Mhm.”

“Could you, help me learn how to act free? I, I think I’ve been doing pretty good, but, I just...”

Ranboo trailed off, looking at the carpet, the stim toy tangled around his fingers.

“That *was* something I wanted to talk about, yes,” Captain Puffy said, and his tail twitched and then flopped back down off the chair by his feet. “Ranboo, could you start me off with why you feel the need to act free?”

“I—It’s, the condition, of me, one of the conditions of me staying home.”

“Uh-huh...” she prompted, noting something without looking down at the notebook. He twisted the toy back around the other way.

After a moment of prolonged silence, Captain Puffy asked, “Could you tell me how that condition was made known to you?”

“Uh, Philza, when he...” at least, Ranboo was pretty sure it had been Philza. Right, because he’d... Ranboo checked his memory book. “So, um. For, for context, I... When Technoblade rescued me, I didn’t know, that I was, not a slave anymore. He freed me but he didn’t tell—I didn’t realize, that I was free, so, I kept thinking of him and Philza as my masters. And they were, very kind to me, but, um, when Philza found out, that I thought I was still a slave, he, he didn’t like that, and that’s why, that’s when the topic of me, moving out and living with someone else, like you, or, some other people, I can’t remember who they were talking about but Philza said that even though he didn’t

want me to leave they might have to make me live with someone else anyway because I was still acting like a slave and I wasn't, wasn't, 'recovering' or maybe I just wasn't recovering *enough*, I can't remember..." Ranboo pressed a hand into his hair, shoving his bangs from his face.

"I, I have a bad memory. But." Ranboo closed his eyes and tried to take a deep breath. He closed his hand into a fist, squeezing his hair and pulling at the roots, "But, I'm not a slave, and I'm free, and I have to act free, but, I keep, I keep having, these, these, these, these thoughts." Ranboo hiccupped around a shallow breath.

"Okay," Captain Puffy prodded quietly.

"I, I want, I want, what I want is—wrong."

"Uh-huh. The 'bad' thoughts you'd mentioned?"

"Yes," Ranboo said, relieved that she understood. "I can't stop them. I keep, wanting, to be, to behave, like a slave, still, and, and I'm not, sure what the criteria is? For, for acting free, and what's not allowed for me to do, I know some of the stuff I want is bad, I know that, but other stuff, I don't, it's hard for me to be able to tell if I'm allowed to want it or not and maybe you could help me, tell the difference?" Ranboo released his hair and looked at Captain Puffy hopefully.

Her quill was moving quickly, one woolly leg bouncing. "So to verify: your 'bad' thoughts are connected to the compulsion to 'act' free?"

Ranboo nodded. "And you can, help?"

"I'm gonna help you sweetie, that's what we're here for."

Ranboo felt himself release a deep rush of air, chest sinking and tail flopping from how it'd curled around his ankle without him knowing.

"And to make sure I'm understanding you: you want to 'act free' because Phil and Techno want that for you?"

Ranboo nodded. "I would do anything for them."

"Okay. So, Ranboo, I'd actually like us to do a little brain exercise on perspective, if that'd be okay?"

Ranboo nodded. He wasn't sure... entirely, what that meant, but if Captain Puffy said it was the right thing for them to do, he'd believe her.

"Okay, so imagine you *had* been free, all your life."

Oh. That was a very hard thing to do. Ranboo's brow furrowed, and he twisted the rainbow toy around his knuckles tightly. If he'd been free all his life...

"O-okay?"

"Now, imagine you're an adult man, not—actually, how old even are you?"

"Uh." Uh. "I think, seventeen?" He tried to double check in his head. He was pretty sure he... came into existence in summer. And it had been... seventeen summers? "I, I *think* seventeen, yeah. I'm

not, I'm not sure."

"Okay, let's go with that. Now, pretend you were an adult man who'd been free your whole life."

"Okay."

"Now, let's say you met Techno as a free adult, okay?" Ranboo nodded. "And let's pretend that Technoblade was a seventeen year old slave."

Oh, Ranboo did *not* like that! His ears pinned back, tail poofing, fingers squeezing so hard around the toy in his hands he heard a knuckle pop.

"I, he, but, he's Technoblade!" Ranboo protested.

"I know, he's very intimidating from afar. But this is just a thought exercise, okay? It's all make believe."

Right.

What... would that even look like? A Technoblade that was young, collared—he'd be one of the angry ones, Ranboo was all too certain. Furious at the indignity of being shackled, the kind that could handle pain like Ranboo never could. Injured. The angry ones were always marked up, one way or another.

"He, he'd be angry."

"Mhm," Captain Puffy agreed. "And scared, too. A lot of anger comes from fear—for everyone. And Ranboo, if you were a free adult, and you met a Techno that was young and scared and enslaved, how would you treat him?"

"Kindly," Ranboo answered without thinking, balling up the tangle between his palms and tail twitching aggravatedly. "He, I," his volume dipped, "I'd free him, if I could."

"Let's say you could. And let's say, after you free him, he has nowhere to go. What do you do then?"

The idea of *not* living with Technoblade was something that actively terrified Ranboo, and so of course he answered, "I'd ask him to stay with me. I—I have somewhere to stay, in this, right?"

"You sure do buddy."

Ranboo nodded vehemently. "He could, he could come live with me, then. If he wanted to." Ranboo thought on that, on his home in the cabin in the snow. It didn't even occur to him to imagine living anywhere else. "We could build a bed big enough for all—is, is Philza in this?"

"Mhm. Let's say Philza is also seventeen, and a slave."

Ranboo frowned. He didn't like that either. But it was all pretend, it was make believe.

"I would free him too, if I could. And we could live together."

"And say Philza and Techno had some pretty heavy trauma, and you wanted to help them but weren't sure how," Captain Puffy prompted, and Ranboo... Ranboo could see what she was doing.

He was pretty sure he'd caught onto the point of this thought exercise. But, dutifully, he answered her implied question.

"I, I might get scared, too, that I wasn't right for it. That, that someone would be better for them, than me," he admitted, and it felt like pulling teeth, but it was honest. "I'd probably get overwhelmed, if they needed help, and I, and I couldn't, and I didn't know how."

Captain Puffy nodded. "Would you send them away un—"

"No!"

Captain Puffy smiled, even as he covered his mouth, face hot. "Sorry. I, I'm sorry I interrupted."

"It's okay. I was just gonna say 'unless you absolutely had to,' but I think you answered the question." She chuckled, and the tips of his *ears* felt hot. "So you wouldn't send them away, because you love them and you care about them, even though they've got a lot to work through because they've been slaves their whole lives, and you're an adult who's always been free. Now, if Technoblade—let's say he lashed out, one day, because he's seventeen and scared and angry. You'd know he was only doing it because he'd been a slave, right?"

"Right."

"And would you be angry with him, for acting like a slave?"

"That, that's different," Ranboo stammered, ears pinned down.

Puffy waited.

"...No, I wouldn't be mad at him," Ranboo admitted. "But, but I know, I, they, they want me to..." Ranboo's mouth hung open, and he closed it with a lick of his lips, then swallowed. "...recover," he finished quietly, looking away, because that had been the word, hadn't it? Ranboo's memory was terrible, but he was pretty sure.

"They want you to recover," Captain Puffy repeated, nodding encouragingly.

"They want me to be *better*," Ranboo insisted, one hand abandoning the stim toy to tug at the tuft of his tail, which was conveniently curled up in his lap. "And I can, I can be better for them, I will, I just, you, if you could help, I..."

"Ranboo," she said softly, and he made an aborted move to sink down to the floor, stopping himself with tense-trembling legs.

"I, I want to kneel," Ranboo admitted bitterly, almost, almost pointedly. Like he was throwing it in her face.

And he knew he was, but she, she didn't understand. "I want to be given orders. I want to grovel at their feet and have them touch my hair like they do their pet animals." Ranboo was breathing hard. "I want to be told I'm a good boy and n-not make my own choices and I'm not, that's wrong, that's *wrong* and I know that's wrong, but I *want* it and that's not how free people act and I'm free now so I *shouldn't* and aren't you supposed to help me?"

"Hey, shhhh, I am, and I will."

“So, so help me, help me learn how to not think like this!”

Ranboo covered his mouth with both hands, tangle forgotten as it hit the carpet. How *dare* he raise his voice at her?! Where in the actual fuck had he gotten this audacity??

“I’m afraid you’re not going to like this,” Captain Puffy said gently, and though her words were soft Ranboo still flinched like he’d been scolded, “but step one is actually gonna be not punishing yourself for having ‘those thoughts.’”

“...What do you mean, ma’am?” he asked meekly, trying to place an apology in his tone.

“Let me tell you a story about a psychology study—don’t worry, it’s not a long story. Now, a scientist asked one group of people to think about whatever they wanted for a minute, and he timed them.”

Oh, that sounded stressful.

“Afterwards, he asked them how many times they’d thought about acacia wood figurines. Now, none of them had thought about acacia wood figurines at all. Then, he asked a second group of people to think about whatever they wanted for a minute—but they *couldn’t* think about acacia wood figurines.”

Oh, that sounded much more stressful.

“When he asked them how many times they’d thought about ‘em at the end of the minute, do you know what happened?”

“They’d—thought about them?”

“Yup! And each time they thought about acacia wood figurines, they got upset with themselves, because it was specifically what they *weren’t* supposed to do, but getting upset with themselves just made them think about the figurines *more* which made them more upset and they got really frustrated with themselves for continuing to think about acacia wood figurines.”

Yeah that made sense. Ranboo could relate.

Oh wait that was probably the point.

“Now, another scientist repeated the study,” Captain Puffy continued, “And in that one, she did the group that should think about whatever, the group that *couldn’t* think about figurines, and then she added a group where she said she was going to count how many times they thought about figurines *before* she started the timer, but never said that they should or shouldn’t, just urged them to think about whatever. Take a guess about the third group.”

“They, thought about the figurines more than the group of whatever, but, um.” Ranboo bit his lip, but... it wasn’t like he’d get in trouble if he got the wrong answer, “But less? Than the group that got upset with themselves?”

Captain Puffy snapped and winked at him with a tap of her finger against the side of her nose. “You got it. Can you see how I’m going to apply this to your situation?”

Ranboo thought on that. “You. Since, since I get. Upset with myself, for having bad thoughts, you want me, to try and stop being upset with myself, when I have them?”

“Two for two. And we’re going to start by not calling them ‘bad’ thoughts anymore.”

“A-ah...”

“You just have thoughts, Ranboo, if you go around beating yourself up for thinking things you’re just going to make yourself miserable.”

“But, but they’re...” Ranboo’s hands trembled, just barely.

“...A product of what you lived through. But you made it out the other end, and you’re safe now. They helped you, when you needed them, and now you can start to—*gently*—let them go.”

Ranboo opened his mouth, but closed it again, and buried his eyes in his palms.

“But, how do I make them stop?” he asked, voice small, halfway to begging. Actually. “How do I stop making myself beg, or kneel, or want to be praised?”

Captain Puffy wrote something down.

“Okay so, for starters, I would like to make it very important and well-known to you, that wanting to be praised is *normal* and is something that *literally everyone* wants. It’s okay for you to want to be praised. Especially since Philza and Techno are people whose opinions matter to you, that’s normal, that happens, that is fine.”

A knot unraveled in Ranboo’s chest. “It is?”

“Mhm. We all want the approval of the people who matter to us. Can you tell me why you felt like that was something you,” she held up her fingers and made little air quotes, “‘weren’t allowed’ to want?”

Ranboo squirmed, tugging on his tail tuft, and oh yeah, he’d had—on the floor, it was on the floor now. He picked up the tangle and twisted it about his fingers, fidgeting anxiously as he tried to come up with an answer. “I, I know that, as a slave, I was. I was supposed to want my master’s approval. A-and my top priority was pleasing him. Or at least, not making him mad.” A pissed off master was bad news for a slave, and Ranboo got underfoot more often than not.

“I... don’t want to want,” Ranboo frowned. No, yeah, that was right. Ugh, words. “I don’t want to want their approval like I wanted his. They’re, they’re so kind to me, Captain, a-and I want—sometimes, I want—them to be my masters, but I don’t want them to be in the same place of my brain that he was, and...”

Captain Puffy wrote something down, and then the two sat in silence, Ranboo hunched and tense, Captain Puffy slowly tapping the end of her quill against her chin as she stared contemplatively at her notes.

She huffed. “Well. It’s messy and tricky, but we’ll get this figured out. Just keep in mind that wanting to be praised is *natural*. Let’s round back to another one. You said you want to kneel?”

Ranboo nodded.

“Do you want to kneel right now?”

His face heated, and he looked at the corner of the little table, hands and tail curled in near his belly. “Yes’m.”

Captain Puffy stood from her chair, making Ranboo’s tail poof, but she just set the same pillow as yesterday down on the floor and took a seat. Smiling up at him, she pat the floor in front of her. Ranboo sank off the chair onto his knees, breathing a deep sigh.

“But... this can’t be right..?” he protested weakly, quiet and low.

“I wouldn’t recommend it as your daily behavior, no,” Captain Puffy agreed, mild and unbothered, “But look, you’re kneeling, and it’s not the end of the world. Nobody’s upset with you for not ‘acting free.’”

Ranboo cringed. “You’re not going to tell Technoblade and Philza, are you?”

“I will not,” Captain Puffy said, steady confidence that Ranboo couldn’t help but relax at.

“I just,” he stuttered, trying to justify himself, “I don’t want them to think I’ve been doing worse than I actually have. I *have* been doing good,” he insisted, pleaded.

“You have been good,” Captain Puffy agreed, “But your goodness is not measured by how ‘normal’ you pretend to be.”

But that wasn’t right!

He keened, a high, needy, frustrated, childish sound, and covered his mouth. She knew better than him. She knew more than him. Technoblade and Philza’d brought him here specifically because she knew more than they did. He shouldn’t argue with her.

“Ranboo,” Captain Puffy said gently, and his tail jerked up with twitchy tension, “would being able to act ‘normal’ make you happy?”

“I, I don’t—I guess, because, because it’s what they want, so...”

“But would it make you happy?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know.”

“That’s okay. It’s okay to not know. What *do* you know makes you happy, specifically pertaining to the thoughts you have regarding your past,” Captain Puffy waved her hand vaguely, “everything about being a slave?”

“Can I get a grass block?” he blurted.

“Go ahead hon.”

Ranboo stood, set the fidget toy back in the bowl, went out back, grabbed the same block from the day before, and when he returned he dug his claws into the dirt and confessed, “I like it when Technoblade pets my hair.”

“Okay, that’s good, that sounds really nice.”

“I like, I like it when they give me concrete directions, o-or orders.”

“Okay. Let’s reframe that—”

Ranboo raised his hand.

“Go ahead.”

“What does... reframing, mean, in this context.”

“We’re going to look at your experiences from a different angle, basically.”

Ranboo nodded.

“So, when people are in new situations, like say you’re a plucky sixteen year old who’s never set foot on a boat before, but has dreams of being a sea captain one day, just as a random example.” She winked. Oh! Oh!!! That must mean her! She was a captain! Ranboo was in on the joke! “But anyway, when you’re in a new situation, people need a lot of guidance, to start. People need to be shown the ropes, have new terms and phrases defined for them, given guidance, particularly when you’re young. It’s not a bad thing.

“Now, some people are the type of people who like to figure things out on their own, or like to be given a baseline, and then let loose.” Ranboo was not one of those people. “Other people like to have their metaphorical hands held for a little while, and receive detailed, thorough instruction.” Ranboo was definitely one of those people. “Both are natural. Both are fine. One isn’t any better than the other. Trying to *make* yourself be something you’re not is a good way to frustrate and upset yourself.”

Ranboo... nodded, slowly, and plucked a strand of frozen grass from the top of his block, twirling it around in his fingers.

“So Ranboo, would you please repeat back what that means, for you?”

Ranboo bit his lip and nodded. “I. I’m new,” he said, and he blinked. The words were out of his mouth before their meaning really hit him, but he was. He was new. To being free, to his lifestyle, still, to existence in general. He was a young Pearl. Eidvyrt had told him. “I’m new, which means I need, guidance. It’s normal, to, want orders and instruction, even though I’m not a slave, because, I’m the type of person, who needs walked through things.”

“And if you try to make yourself do things on your own before you feel ready to..?”

“That’s going. To distress me.”

Captain Puffy nodded.

“Which is a bad thing..?”

Captain Puffy nodded again.

“Okay.” Ranboo stroked the reassuring texture of the dirt. “What. Um. What, so what, *should*, I do, if I get, get, the urge to kneel at one of their feet, a-and be, um, like a pet?”

“That brings us to one of the other big things I wanted to talk to you about.”

Oh no.

“Ranboo, how would you describe your communication skills?”

Uh.

“Uh.”

“When you feel confused, or lost, or unsure, do you ask questions?”

Ahahaha. Ha. Haa... “No.”

“Mhm. And when you receive new information, do you repeat it back to clarify that you’re understanding it correctly?”

Well. Uh. “No...”

“And when you’re distressed, or uncomfortable, do you let the people around you know, or wait and hope they notice?”

“Th-the second one...”

“And when you have these thoughts that upset you, or make you feel like you’re not ‘acting free,’ or when you just have wants or desires that you’re not sure you’re allowed, do you bring it up with Techno or Phil?”

Ranboo looked at her with wide panic. “Please don’t tell them,” he breathed, rushed, tail curled.

“I won’t,” Captain Puffy swore, raising hands in surrender. “By the powers of Prime, I physically *can’t*; I took an oath. But I do think you should. Not today. Maybe not even before they leave for their trip. But eventually. It’s something you should feel safe discussing with them, and I want us to work on getting you to that point.”

Ranboo hated that idea. He was sure it showed on his face.

“Hey, Ranboo. Remember our thought exercise. If you were the free man, and they were your freed-slaves-turned-friends instead, would you be mad at them for having the kinds of thoughts and wants you’re having now?”

“N-No.”

“They won’t be upset with you. They might be concerned, but that’s only because they want the best for you,” Captain Puffy assured. And she sounded so *certain*.

“But, but, why, why should I, talk, about my b—my, uh, thoughts, if, if there’s, it’s not like I *can* just kneel at their feet, even if I want to, so, why, why bring it up?”

Captain Puffy hummed thoughtfully and tapped her chin.

“Ranboo, does *not* being able to kneel at their feet distress you?”

“I, not, not always. But, sometimes, when I, when I *really* want it, I...” Ranboo hugged the grass block tighter, “Yes, sometimes.”

“Okay, how about we make a deal then? I don’t think it would necessarily be bad, to give your brain what it wants, every now and then. It shouldn’t become a regular part of your routine, but when you really, really want to kneel at their feet, you have my therapist-ordained permission to ask them if that’d be alright and go ahead and do that if they say yes. You have to check with them—it might not be something *they’re* comfortable with, even if they won’t be mad at you. But I think indulging every once in a while in a safe environment with people you trust wouldn’t be a bad thing.”

“It wouldn’t?”

“Our brains are weird and funky,” Captain Puffy stated, circling a finger around her ear, “They don’t always process information the way we’d like them to. Sometimes, when we go through traumatic events, like being enslaved, our brains want to poke at that and process it strangely. A way that helps some people is by engaging with the things that happened to them during the trauma, but in their new situation, where they’re safe, and have control over it.

“If at any point in time you decide you want to stop kneeling with Techno or Phil, you can. They won’t hurt you or be mad if you decide against your earlier decision. I take it that wasn’t the case with your master?”

“Not at all,” Ranboo said quietly.

“Right. So you have control, in these types of situations, because you’re in a safe environment with people you care about, and who care about you. It helps your brain take the sting out of the trauma, to engage with it in new, safe, feel-good ways, as opposed to the feel-bad ways you were previously forced into.”

“I... think I understand,” Ranboo said. And oh! He needed. To write ALL of this down.

Captain Puffy was patient with him, as he detailed everything from the thought exercise to the safe reprocessing of trauma, to the talking to Technoblade and Philza about the bad thoughts idea (which he hated). More happily, he wrote about the yoga, which he’d nearly forgotten about so it was a good thing he was doing this now.

“Sorry,” he apologized.

“No worries. Another thing that’s low priority, but I’d like you to start getting in the habit of: try switching out your ‘sorry’s’ for ‘thank you’s.’”

Ranboo tilted his head inquisitively.

“So, like right now, instead of apologizing for needing to write things in your memory book, you would instead say ‘thank you for waiting’ or ‘thank you for being patient,’ something like that. Make sense? That way, the person you’re talking to feels appreciated, and you’re keeping an attitude of gratitude, instead of remorse.”

“A-ah.” Ranboo wrote that down as well. “Um, thank you, for being patient while I write?”

“Perfect! That’s exactly right.”

Ranboo’s ears perked up, spine straightening, and his tail thumped.

“Aaaaand back to the gross, gross topic of ~*communication*~,” she said with a waggle of her fingers. Then she deadpanned, “You gotta.”

Ranboo whined.

Captain Puffy laughed. “I know, and living with those two I bet you’ve got just the best role models,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “But healthy communication is the foundational block on which functional relationships are built, so you gotta.”

“Do, do, do I *have* to tell them about, about—what am I allowed to call them, if, if I can’t call them ‘bad’ thoughts?”

“How about let’s use ‘impulses’ as a shorthand for now?”

“Okay. Do I have to tell them about my slave impulses?”

“I can’t make you,” Captain Puffy stated with benign simplicity, “But it’s one of my goals that, by the end of this, you’re at a place where you’re comfortable enough that you want to.”

Ha. Haha. “Comfortable” was only very rarely a word that Ranboo would use to describe himself.

He fiddled with a page of his memory book, the familiar texture of it soothing.

“Ranboo, can I run my goals for you by you, just to make sure we’re on the same page?”

“Oh, yes,” he said, lifting his own quill and readying himself to write.

“I’d like to see you grow more comfortable asking clarifying questions when you’re confused, and also just to confirm that you’re understanding what’s been said to you and the situation you’re in. That can help you avoid feeling lost or confused, as well as help avoid misunderstandings, like how you’d not known you were no longer a slave, or how you were scared of therapy because you didn’t understand what it was, or how you thought you were in danger of getting sent away. If the people around you are aware of what’s going on inside your head, they can help give you certainty, or they can give you more details or correct details, depending on what you need.”

Ranboo... nodded.

“So, I should, ask questions to make sure I’m understanding things..?” he tried.

“Just like that, yes!” Captain Puffy said brightly, and Ranboo smiled with a flip of his tail.

“But, won’t that get—annoying?”

“I would like to point out to you that temporarily inconveniencing them is a better option than you stressing yourself out needlessly over a misunderstanding.”

Ah.

“I would also like to point out to you that asking clarifying questions is actually a sign of something called Active Listening. It shows you’re paying attention, and you’re invested in understanding the person you’re talking to. Generally speaking, people want to be listened to and understood.”

Ah.

“I would also like you to look through your memory journal and tell me how many times Philza or Technoblade have gotten annoyed with you, so far.”

Ranboo skimmed.

“Um. They. I-I thought, that Technoblade was annoyed with me, once, but, he was just busy,” Ranboo confessed with warm cheeks and ears, squirming slightly. “I, I don’t think, I don’t think, ever, before that, um.”

“Okay that’s kinda impressive actually I was expecting you to say something like ‘a handful of times’ but hey! Glad to see they’re working on their issues.”

Captain Puffy placed a tiny little hand on his skinny little knee. “It’s my hope that seeing you go into therapy makes it easier for me to wrangle Techno and Phil in here too.”

Ranboo frowned.

“But, they’re, perfect?”

“Oh buddy.”

Ranboo’s ears pinned back, but Captain Puffy let the subject drop.

“My next goal for you is to actually express your wants and needs—all of them—and to seek out reassurance when you want or need it.”

Ranboo’s frown deepened.

“I. Need—I *want*, a lot, um, of reassurance.”

“Good. You deserve it. You’re allowed to seek it out.”

Ranboo held his tongue against the “but won’t that get annoying” that ran into his teeth.

“...?” Captain Puffy made an inquisitive little noise, tilting her head, and Ranboo shifted.

“T-temporarily inconveniencing someone, because I want reassurance, is better, than me, not getting reassurance?”

“Yep! And there are two of ‘em, so if you feel like one of them is starting to seem a little worn down, you can always try and spread it out between the two. They know you’ve got a lot going on, Ranboo, they’re aware you’re going to need some extra comfort.”

“But they already give me so *much*!”

“And you make them happy.” Ranboo blinked at the statement. He gave her a bewildered look.

“I—what?”

She huffed a heavy breath, then chuckled.

“Look, Ranboo, I’ve known Philza and Technoblade ever since they were first starting their whole...” Captain Puffy waved her hand, “Whatever those two are. Relationship. There’s not a whole lot in this world that softens those two down. Will did. Philza getting really badly hurt did. You do. They’re soft with you; they’re gentle. You make them happy, Ranboo, and speaking as a parent and grandparent, I know for a fact that they’d give you the world.”

“They, they’re not, my parents,” Ranboo protested, face flushed for whole new reasons and claws digging into dirt.

“They aren’t, but they’re not just your friends, either.”

“...they’re not,” Ranboo agreed quietly, whisper little more than a breath.

The room was quiet again.

“But the main goal I have for you, right now, is to work on communicating. That’s the heart of it. Your needs, your understandings, I’m not expecting you to suddenly become a chatty Cathy, but I’d like you to try speaking up just a liiiiiiittle more often,” Captain Puffy summarized, and Ranboo nodded.

Honestly, he couldn’t even contest that. It was a reasonable goal. And probably something he should really, genuinely be working on. Which would be why the therapist was suggesting it.

It still sounded awful and stressful though.

“Okay. Did you have any other key points you wanted to bring up today? I know this has already been fairly draining.”

Ha. Yeah. And they were just... talking.

Captain Puffy had them wrap up by having Ranboo tell her a little more about his life before Technoblade and Philza, which involved a lot of him just. Reading his memory book out loud to her.

He found that... he didn’t really mind as much. He mentioned that to her, that normally he *hated* it when other people read his memory book.

“Well, I’m not the one reading your memory diary, hon. You’re still the one who has it right there in your hands, you get to choose whatever you want to tell me. The control is all yours. That’s way different than someone taking something important to you and reading over it like they own it.”

Ranboo nodded. “Like, like, control, like, the kneeling thing?”

“Yeah!” she smiled brightly. “Same basic principle. Having agency over yourself and situation.”

Ranboo’s ears flared straight upright at that word. Captain Puffy blinked at his reaction. “That—agency.”

“Mhm?”

“That’s, that’s what Philza and Technoblade, that matters to them.”

“You bet your butt it does.”

Ranboo giggled at her phrasing.

“Alllllllright,” Captain Puffy announced, getting to her hooves with a stretch, arching her back. “I think that’s enough for today. Go ahead and put the block back and I’ll close up,” she said, crossing to the candle and blowing it out.

Ranboo did as he was bid, getting his coat on and putting the dirt in its place, then meeting her out front as she finished fighting with the lock.

“I gotta get Sam to come work his magic on that sometime,” she grouched, “Or maybe I’ll drag Foolish out here.”

Ranboo tried to remember if he knew anyone named Foolish. It seemed like a strange name.

(It seemed more like a slave’s name than a person’s, but he wouldn’t assume that here.)

He checked his notebook. No sign of anyone named Foolish, there. Right? Or had he simply forgotten to write it down? It was very possible that in the ever expanding list of people that Technoblade and Philza knew that Ranboo didn’t, he’d simply passed over the name, before. But he *was* thinking of the name now.

“Oh speak of the devil!” Captain Puffy chimed, sounding delightedly surprised.

A faint glow emanated from her long, velvety ear. Ah, a communicator then.

“Awww, no worries, I’ll have to check with my houseguests but yeah! What’s a poppop for?” She laughed. “Oh no, anything but time with my grandson, ohhhhh.

“Sure. Hey, Ranboo.” Ranboo blinked, tugging on his fingers and looking down at her horns. “Something came up and Foolish needs me to babysit later this evening. You think you’ll be okay for it?”

Honestly? Ranboo was *exhausted*. He kind of wanted to eat lunch and take a nap. But it was literally Captain Puffy’s family, in Captain Puffy’s house, no way could he say no.

“Um. Yes? I, uh, might be asleep for part of it...”

Captain Puffy snorted. “It wouldn’t be till later anyway. Okay, houseguest number one is cool with it, I’ll call you back when I hear from the other two. Mhm, love you! Mokay, bye.”

“So, um, would a, clarifying question, in this situation,” Ranboo started hesitantly when the red glow faded from her ear, “be, um. Foolish is your son’s? Name?”

“Yup! Foolish is my son, Foolish Jr. is my grandson. I mostly refer to him as Jr.”

Ranboo wrote that down.

“That’s. An interesting name...” he hedged, not wanting to ask outright.

“Mmhmm. He already had it when I adopted him, and he didn’t want to change it,” Captain Puffy stated simply. And okay. Ranboo was done asking questions for now. Asking questions was actually exceedingly tiring.

A pat pat pat to the small of his back made his ears flick up, tail twitching. “Good job asking clarifying questions, Ranboo! I’m proud of you.”

Ranboo beamed.

They got home to the smell of cooked bell peppers and potato hash. Ranboo accepted the hug Technoblade offered him with his face flopped into his neckline, ate, found Max on the living room floor, and promptly fell asleep.

He hadn’t even *done* anything that day. Not really. But he did wake up in the guest bed, Max still with him, and Ranboo felt an unhappy curl in his stomach. Max was allowed on the furniture at home, but was that still true here?

He sat up, and Max perked with happy ears and a wagging tail. “Hey boy,” Ranboo said very, very quietly.

He briefly considered not bringing it up. Max couldn’t get in trouble if nobody knew, right? But also, if Ranboo didn’t know something, his therapist had specifically instructed that he ask questions.

“Hey Ranboo!” Captain Puffy greeted when he made his way downstairs, poofy hair in a ponytail, kitschy watering can in hand, and a big leafed plant by the window. “You sleep well?”

“Yes Captain,” he said meekly, reaching a hand down to pat at Max’s fur as he panted and wagged near Ranboo’s heels. “Um, ma’am, if, sometime, Max wanted to get up on the furniture with me, would that be alright?” he asked, trying to keep it hypothetical, about the future, just in case it wasn’t.

“Of course hon. Was he in bed with you when you woke up?”

Ah. Ranboo ducked his head. Of course that would be obviously transparent. “Yes’m.”

“Good boy,” she praised, not having to bend down at all to give the wolfdog a friendly pat on the head and getting her whole entire wrist slobbered on for her efforts. Ranboo smiled, his own tail wagging even though he hadn’t even been the one praised.

“Is, um, your grandson here?” Ranboo asked, having no idea what time it was or what had passed while he was sleeping.

“Oh shit!”

Ranboo jumped, tail poofing.

“Hey Phil and Techno!” Captain Puffy called, “My son needs a babysitter tonight, you mind if Jr.’s over?”

“Aw pog,” came Philza’s unmistakable return, and Ranboo followed Captain Puffy to her dining room, where Philza and Techno had a tarp laid out over her table and.

Ah. TNT.

“We’re rolling these for recreational purposes,” Technoblade stated when he saw Ranboo.

“Same as the fireworks,” Philza agreed mildly.

Ranboo wasn’t gonna question it Ranboo wasn’t gonna question it.

“And if they’re used for anything other than recreation, I had no knowledge of it,” Captain Puffy stated.

“Always good to have some plausible deniability,” Technoblade agreed.

Where had they gotten all the gunpowder? Where had they *stored* it? Ranboo checked his memory book. Hm. Okay, he guessed the two of them went out on hunts for gunpowder and bonemeal fairly often, but... oh, and, and right, he hadn’t thought about it in a long, long time, but... he *had* been aware for some months that Technoblade had a hidden vault, of some sort or another. He’d known that, hadn’t he?

How long... had they been planning this?

“Yeah hey baby, ‘m good to babysit tonight... I got home and smelled *food*; of course I immediately forgot! And can you blame me?”

Philza snorted and Ranboo took a seat next to Technoblade. He stared at the gunpowder, at the sand, at the red paper used to roll it.

“Well then you are a horrible awful son and I can’t believe you’ve done this to me.”

Ranboo watched Technoblade resume, having clearly decided that Ranboo wasn’t there to chat or seek out anything but the warmth of his side. Technoblade’s pink-tinted hands were certain and steady as he gathered five parts gunpowder to four parts sand, as he lined the powders up neat and rolled them into sticks, into bundles.

“Yeah whenever works for you baby; I’m here all night. Though if you get done after his bedtime you might as well just leave him here.”

These were going to be used on Ranboo’s old master. Well, probably on a lot more than *just* his old master: there was a *lot* of TNT already rolled and a *lot* of gunpowder left to go. But his old master, namely, was included amongst their targets.

“M’kay, see you soon. Love you too, bye-bye.”

“You don’t have to,” Technoblade said gently, quietly, as Ranboo set a red paper in front of himself, and started lining up the gunpowder.

“I know,” he returned.

He wanted to.

He was... oddly devoid, of emotion. Devoid of thought, really. But he lined up the paper, lined up five parts gunpowder to four parts sand, and rolled the stick of TNT, the smell bright and bitter in his nose, though he did not sneeze. But even as strangely calm, strangely empty as his head felt—

He wanted to.

“And Ranboo is helping his friends with their recreational tasks because he is a good and helpful friend and I have seen *nothing* else in my house tonight,” Captain Puffy stated, “You boys want mac ‘n cheese?”

Ranboo tilted his head. Did he know what that was?

“Ooo, with sausage?” Philza asked, interested.

“You know it!”

“How old is Jr.?” Technoblade asked, the blasé interest that he often showed in his tone.

“He’s gonna be three next month!” Captain Puffy announced happily, and Ranboo could *hear* the scrunch of her nose, the crinkling near her eyes, the way an ear flicked with her smile.

The house was quiet, for a while. Twitch would occasionally caw out a phrase or whistle, and Philza would occasionally answer or whistle back. Captain Puffy could be heard in the kitchen next to them, hooves on the wood floor, pot boiling on the stove, meat sizzling in a pan on the burner next to it. The susurrus of sand and gunpowder was pleasant in Ranboo’s ears, a quiet subtlety he had the space to appreciate. Max, laid on the floor by Technoblade’s feet, would sometimes sigh or sit up to scratch behind an ear or lick between his haunches.

From the dining room, the living room was visible. From the living room, windows opened out to the front of the house. And, some time and many rolls of TNT later, in front of the house, an iron golem approached. Except it wasn’t made out of iron. And it was wearing clothing. And it was opening the door, which golems Did Not Do.

Ranboo stared.

The ~~iron~~ golden golem had emeralds for eyes, which glowed faintly like Ranboo’s own green one, and was wearing a grey hoodie and a white skirt, with a belt made of gold, emerald flecks, and lapis. The skirt had *very* high slits up the sides. It did not really match with the modern plainness of the hoodie at all. Also, the golem was holding a second, *smaller* golem in its arms, bundled in white cloth that matched the larger one’s skirt and what looked like a mix between a red turban and a beanie on its head.

“Hey papa!” the golem called out, in perfectly understandable Common.

Was Ranboo still asleep?

Captain Puffy let out an ecstatic gasp from the kitchen, and when Ranboo glanced briefly over (before he resumed Staring) she wiped her hands on a dishtowel. “Are my boys here?”

“Your boys are here!” the golem said happily, voice strangely average, maybe a little worn with frequent use.

“I want to see my little boy~” Captain Puffy sang as she clopped through the dining room and into the living room.

“Here he comes~” the large golem sang back, bending down to kiss her cheek and receive one in return. “Say hi to Poppop,” it—he?—urged, and handed the small golem over to Captain Puffy, who cooed and crooned a delighted hello.

Ranboo looked to Technoblade. Surely this, surely this was strange, right? Was Ranboo the only one who found this strange? It seemed that way, because Philza and Technoblade were dusting off their hands and rising from the table.

“Hi mate,” Philza greeted, extending a hand to the golden golem as Captain Puffy pressed a fluttering of little kisses to the smaller golem’s face.

“Philzaaaaaa, hey-hey!” the large golem returned, shaking his hand enthusiastically. “Good to see you man!”

“Good to see you; you look well.”

“Yeah! Yeah. Things are good on my end, things are good. Parenthood is crazy, you know how that goes.”

Philza laughed, one of his bright little peals. “Ohhh, do I!”

“And Techno! Good to see you too!”

“Foolish,” Technoblade returned, shaking the outstretched golden hand and—

Wait, *this* was Foolish!? When their small sheep-hybrid host had said she had a son and grandson Ranboo had expected—

Well. Okay. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected. But it wasn’t this!

Gee, okay, fuck, he needed to be polite. He stumbled hesitantly to his feet, feeling like a newborn foal, and meekly approached Foolish, sticking close to Technoblade’s side.

“Hi, I don’t believe we’ve met,” Foolish said, smiling at Ranboo, and it was *unnerving* that metal could move like that.

“Hello sir, my name is Ranboo,” he said, half-extending his hand to the *golem* that was a *golem* he was talking to a *golem* he was reaching his hand out to be intentionally and actively touched by a *golem* why was he doing this oh god oh god oh god—

“It’s nice to meet you Ranboo, call me Foolish,” he returned, and mercifully did not touch Ranboo for very long, or crush any of the bones in his hand. Good things. Things Ranboo was grateful for. Things Ranboo appreciated from the safety of standing behind Technoblade, hands fisted anxiously in the man’s cape.

“Sorry I can’t stick around, but I gotta go. Thanks again, Papa,” Foolish said as he bent once more to place a kiss to the top of Captain Puffy’s head, and Ranboo...

No, okay, Ranboo wasn’t good with gender but he knew it was something that was an important big deal to everyone else. “Papas” were men, and Captain Puffy, but...

“Welcome! Have fun.”

Foolish laughed dubiously, ducking through the doorway. “I’ll try,” he said, sounding highly skeptical. Oh, his hood kinda looked like a shark tail, that was cute.

And then the door was closed behind him and Philza was returning to the table and Captain Puffy was nuzzling the little golem in her arms. Ah. Jr. She was nuzzling Jr.

“And now I’ve got the baaaaabyyyyy,” she crooned, tickling him, and he shriek-laughed in the way children do and on one hand it was a comfortingly human sound, but on the other, hearing it come out of a tiny *golem* did not actually make the frizz on Ranboo’s tail go down.

“You okay?” Technoblade asked, and oh, Ranboo was still clinging to his cape. He released it, but couldn’t exactly bring himself to nod.

“I, hadn’t realized golems were people,” he said, rather than answer the question.

“Oh, no,” Captain Puffy said with a little laugh, “No Ranbaby, Foolish and Jr. aren’t golems.” She patted Ranboo’s arm as she walked past, carrying the child into the kitchen with her. “They’re Breathing Totems of Undying!”

Ranboo *genuinely* could not tell if that made it worse or better.

“Alright, dinner’s in ten, clear off the table boys!” Captain Puffy demanded mildly, and Technoblade turned back to the dining room with a careful eye on Ranboo, who followed in his shadow and helped them pack up. Ah. Those were. Some of the packs that had been on Carl. Ranboo saw.

He waaaaasn’t gonna ask. He knew Captain Puffy had specifically instructed him to ask questions when he didn’t understand things, or needed clarification, but you know what? He didn’t need clarification on this, actually. Nope! No clarification today.

“Ahhhh.”

He stared at Jr. throughout most (all) of dinner, Technoblade needing to prompt him to eat *twice* over the course of the meal. He just! He. Ahhh. Hm.

There was a bright room of cheerful colors and large, round-edged toys in Captain Puffy’s house, and it was to that room she took Jr. after he’d eaten a solid half of his food and gotten the rest on his face, hands, bib, and also Max’s mouth. Ranboo. Followed.

Foolish scared him, golem or not. But Jr.—Jr. was just a kid. A... primitively frightening, child, on one level, but also a child. And a curiosity. And Ranboo. Was curious.

As soon as Captain Puffy set him down, Jr. ran to a stuffed pig and showed it off to his—poppop—and Ranboo.

“Hey, you’ve got your little guy!” Captain Puffy said happily, getting down on the carpet with Jr., and Ranboo followed suit. “That’s his *favorite* toy, he plays with it every time he comes over,” she informed Ranboo.

“Ah.”

“What’s his name today, Jr.?”

“Mich-a’!” Jr. announced happily, and oh! Ranboo blinked. Yes, of course, because if Foolish could talk, then of course Jr. could also talk. Because they were people. And not golems. And Breathing Totems of Undying. Which were people.

Ah.

“Micah! What are you and Micah going to do today?”

Jr. contemplated that.

“Boo!” he announced.

“Ohhh, you’re gonna play boo?”

Ranboo did not know what that was. It seemed to involve Jr. sitting down on the carpet and having Micah interact with the other stuffies. Which mostly involved smooshing the dolls together, and sometimes on top of one another. When Ranboo looked, he could tell that Micah was clearly the most well-loved of Jr.’s dolls. It was faded in patches, most notably a large worn section of its head, and pieces and parts of its arms and legs. Ranboo smiled at that. He’d never had any toys of his own, that he could remember.

Captain Puffy picked up a rabbit doll and had it bounce over near Jr.’s, and she asked him questions and listened to his mostly-unintelligible baby talk (which he, interestingly enough, only made when prompted), and Ranboo... hedged closer.

He picked up a green and red wooden horse with wheels for legs, and rolled it close-ish to Jr. and Captain Puffy. Jr set Micah atop the horse, making a high-pitched noise that sounded maybe-halfway like a word, and Ranboo chuckled, hesitant, but more or less genuine. He made a happy little Ender vocalization, rolling the horse so that both the dolls moved, and Jr. took his plushy back and continued to move the dolls about his own way.

“He’s young,” Captain Puffy said, her voice at a low enough pitch Ranboo could tell she was talking to him, rather than her grandson. “He’s not quiiiiite to the point where he really plays *with* others. Huh baby?” her voice pitched back up to a coo, and she hunched forward so their faces were close. “You’re still in the parallel play stage of your development. Yes you are!” She pressed her lips to his little face and made quick kissy noises, rather like the sort that Ranboo had come to associate with Philza.

He raised his hand.

“Yeah hon?”

“What does ‘parallel’ mean?”

“Uhhh, so when you’re talking about math, it means two lines that are directly straight next to each other. So like, poles on a ladder are parallel to each other. Or columns on a building. When we’re talking child development, it means the kids play *near* one another, but they’re not really playing *with* one another. Make sense?”

Ranboo nodded.

He rolled the toy horse idly between his hands along the carpet, watching Jr. play. A lot of Ranboo’s brain was still pinging the weird sorta-danger signals, which were up against the remainder of his brain seeing that this was just a kid. A kid with a doll and assorted toys giving babbling answers to his poppop and moving bright colors and soft textures this way and that.

“Captain?”

“Mm?”

“What, um, *is*, a Breathing Totem of Undying?”

Captain Puffy blew out air, lips raspberrying briefly. “So, you know how sheep aren’t people, but sheep-hybrids are? Or pigs and pig-hybrids, birds and bird-hybrids?”

Ranboo nodded.

“It’s sooooorta like that? Except not. Totems of undying aren’t people, they’re inanimate objects with Universe-blessed magic stored in them, but every so often, very, very rarely, a totem of undying will... morph? Into a person?”

“No one’s really sure what causes it. Totems of undying are already rare, and Breathing Totems of Undying are way rarer. The last couple decades, maybe going on a century now, there have been a couple different cults cropping up here and there that have tried to figure out how to make the change happen on purpose.” Captain Puffy shrugged. “And for all we know, maybe some of ‘em have even succeeded. No one knows what they’re doing or why they want to; they keep those secrets to their graves. But anyway. Breathing Totems of Undying are basically just ordinary totems of undying that the Universe gave a soul and their physical form changed.”

Captain Puffy sha-sha-sha’d her hand, fingers flexing almost-claw-like, against Jr’s shoulder. “And they turn into babies!”

Jr. looked up at Captain Puffy, and held up two fingers.

“Yup! You’re two! Pretty soon it’s gonna be your birthday and you’ll be *three!*”

This was, apparently, very inspiring information.

Ranboo continued to observe the metal child as he played, Captain Puffy seemingly content to just be near her grandson as he did. Ranboo stretched out on the floor, tail flopping out behind him, and laid his head on one bent arm while the other made little stacks of colorful, rounded blocks. Jr. would occasionally break from whatever he was doing to knock the stacks down, giggle-shrieking delightedly each time he did, and Ranboo smiled and stacked them right back up.

Eventually, though, Jr. started to grow cranky, and Captain Puffy scooped him up and kissed him on the head.

“Alright, is it bedtime for the fussy baby?”

Jr. made a high pitched, argumentative noise.

“I hear you, I hear you, but you can play more later, after you’ve slept. Sleeping will make you feel happier.”

Jr. whined.

“I knoooooow, I’m sowwy.”

Ranboo stretched, stood, and left the playroom, finding Philza once again seated with his wing uncovered and outstretched, Technoblade behind him and both their hands picking through the feathers.

He didn't look at the eyespot. He crossed over to the couch and sat down next to Technoblade, blinking and humming quietly to himself. Captain Puffy's hooves made pleasant thunks against the stairs as she carried Jr. up to bed, the sounds reminding Ranboo faintly of Technoblade, when he was emotional enough to make sound when he walked.

Ranboo leaned in, face resting against the fur of Technoblade's cape, lanky body draped bonelessly against his side, and he reached out slowly. Like this, he couldn't see the part of Philza's wing that had the eyespot, blocked by Technoblade's body and the pale fur taking up most of Ranboo's vision. Like this, he was only in range of the small feathers near the joint, where wing met back, and Ranboo stroked the back of his index finger down the tertials.

Philza shivered, the feathers poofing briefly, slightly, but then he resettled with a small trill that Ranboo reflexively mimicked. Technoblade chuckled, more felt beneath Ranboo's floppy body than actually heard, a huff of breath, and Ranboo did not attempt to do... whatever it was, that they were doing. Preening, he thought. Yeah, that sounded about right. Preening. But he did lean, and touch, and stroke his fingers gently, tenderly down the inky feathers.

Captain Puffy, once she'd returned downstairs, offered honey apple hooch to Technoblade and Philza, who both accepted with a thanks, and apple juice to Ranboo, who didn't really have the energy in him to sit himself upright and take it, and thus meekly declined. He closed his eyes and listened to the idle conversation that passed between the three adults, questions on gardens, on sailing, on weather and star charts and foreign ports and farmer's markets passed between them with subdued camaraderie.

Philza's feathers were familiar, and while they were not "soft," the texture held a bone-deep comfort in them for Ranboo.

He hadn't even realized he'd started dozing until Technoblade nudged him back awake, rumbling that they were going to go upstairs and head to bed, and Ranboo blinked and nodded and pinched the red fabric of Technoblade's cape and followed him upstairs.

The next day, Foolish came by again (and Ranboo was less scared but still Definitely Scared) to pick Jr. up, and then Captain Puffy had Philza, Technoblade, and Ranboo join her in the therapist office. Ranboo had at first been nervous, but she assured him that she just wanted some daily statistics that he might not remember on his own, nothing to worry about.

To her credit, she did in fact want statistics, and he would not, in fact, have remembered them all on his own.

She asked them what their diet was like, how often Ranboo hydrated, the ways he hydrated and which ones he felt were most effective, what were his eating habits like, even beyond the balance of nutrition, how much did he eat, she asked about their sleep schedule, if they went to bed and woke up around the same time every day, how much did he exercise, how much time did he spend working versus how much he spent playing, engaging in hobbies, and resting, what were his hobbies, how did Ranboo distinguish the daily chore aspect of taking care of his animals from the hobby aspect, if he did at all, how much intellectual stimulation was he getting and how often, were any efforts being made to educate him beyond his already-posessed basic literacy, how often did they clean their home and how thoroughly, what were all three of their personal hygiene routines

(this was the grossest Ranboo saw Captain Puffy get), what kind of first aid supplies did they keep in the house, how much sunlight did Ranboo get, did being a half-Enderman mean he needed less sunlight than average hybrids, how many friends did he have and what was his social circle like, what non-animals did he interact with with any regularity, could he tell her more about Eidvryt, did he have any friends his own age, did he have his own space to retreat to, what was that space like, what was his clothing situation, was he kept warm enough, did he have options to thermoregulate and did he feel comfortable seeking them out without asking, question after question, enough to make Ranboo's head spin.

Captain Puffy explained that Ranboo had a lot of Big Brain Problems, but if he had smaller physical problems, or smaller brain upkeep problems, (or big physical problems), they could tally up and get in the way of him taking care of his brain trauma. Ranboo hadn't been aware there was so much that went into balancing a healthy brain and body. Philza pat his shoulder and assured him that he and Technoblade were there to help him out with it.

After, Captain Puffy offered Philza and Technoblade the option of doing yoga with her and Ranboo, and after that she had Ranboo talk to her some more and reiterate their shared goals for him regarding recovery and therapy. They got home to an empty house, and Technoblade and Philza returned later smelling of lapis and magic and the unmistakable scent of something holy.

Ranboo continued not to ask.

Ranboo continued to think about his slave impulses, and if it would really be alright.

Would they really not be mad? Ranboo's slave impulses seemed like the only surefire stuff that *did* upset them.

But if they weren't mad, if they *did* indulge him, not all the time but only when he really needed it...

But he already asked so much from them, and they already gave him so much more, Ranboo *couldn't* keep getting away with it.

Except Technoblade had told him that life was just a series of bothering people and being bothered, and as such it didn't matter. Except Captain Puffy had told him that it was better to inconvenience people than for him to suffer.

And he wasn't suffering. But, given the everything about him, one day he probably would. And it would be better to discuss it with them when he was coherent and more or less calm about it, than try to bring it up when he was desperate and frightened and halfway to grovelling anyway. Right?

But that meant bringing it up, and even if Ranboo was convinced that he wanted to talk about it (and he didn't, except, maybe he also did?) he still had no idea how to approach the topic with them.

Actually, Ranboo just straight up didn't know how to start. Uh. Conversations. In general. Normally, he just spoke when spoken to. Right? He would occasionally ask questions, or tentatively extend a "sir," but how did you just Start a Conversation? How did you start a conversation about a serious topic? Much less one that would undoubtedly upset one if not all three parties present.

Philza's fingers brushed against his forehead, and he vwooped, eyes squinting as he leaned into the touch. His fingers dug into the texture of the quilt over Captain Puffy's guest bed, and behind Philza, Technoblade was changing into nightclothes.

Philza sighed.

"So Ranboo," he said, sitting next to Ranboo on the bed and cradling his shoulders beneath a wing, "I noticed you've had a lot on your mind today, so this is probably a great time for me to broach a serious conversation topic, but..." Philza rubbed at the bridge of his nose, then pinched it. "Okay, just out with it then. Techno and I are heading out tomorrow. We'll wait until after breakfast, but when you head off to therapy, we'll head out as well."

Ah. Well. Then.

"When will you be back?" Ranboo asked quietly, suddenly, coldly numb.

"Week, week and a half, maybe two. Depends on how smoothly we get everyone—well." Philza pet Ranboo's hair, and he flopped in against him. "We'll see how many problems we run into. But we'll be back before you know it, and then it's back home to your cats."

Despite himself, his ears did flick at the mention of his cats. He missed them. And Eidvyr. And his cows, and his rabbit, despite not having them for very long.

His own uncomfortable topic of conversation forgotten, Ranboo said, "Okay," in a miserable little mumble, and as the three laid down that night, he clung to Technoblade tightly.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: a lot of times, when Ranboo's checking his memory book, it's actually me skimming over earlier chapters so I can remember what the heck I've written.

And sorry to everyone, but I'm gonna need to take another hiatus! I'd planned on finishing this fic before my zine stuff really picked up, but *gestures at ever increasing chapter count* that did not go as planned. So I'll be gone for... a week or two? Depends on how well I can focus. If you're an adult and you'd like to chat with me, or even just get updates on when I'm thinking I'll be back, you can join my adult-only [discord here](#) (teens, I appreciate you, but come back when you're older). As for the rest of you lovelies, I'll see you whenever next I'm available to get back to this <3

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

And I'm back from hiatus! Thanks for being patient. It's taken, like, everything in me not to spoil the events of this chapter just by blabbing about them so I'm very excited to share. Hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo was slow to rise, the next morning.

Slow to dress. Slow to eat. Slower still to leave the house.

“Ranboo,” Technoblade scolded gently, so soft it couldn’t really even count as scolding, “We need to go.”

Carl was packed. Max and Twitch were ready. Philza’s wings were out, the cozies put away so he could fly. The moment Ranboo stepped outside the door, he would get two hugs, and his friends would *leave*.

It was so hard for him to step forward, cold air flowing in around his ankles and no doubt ruining the warmth in Captain Puffy’s house.

“We’ll be back soon,” Philza assured, Ranboo forcing his wooden legs to move the few steps to him, who normally was so easy for Ranboo to want to go to. He clung to Philza and tried not to whimper, tried to bite down on his childish, needy vocalizations. When Philza released him, he hung on just a second longer, then made himself let go.

He looked to Technoblade miserably, not wanting this, not wanting this, not wanting this at all. Technoblade sighed and pulled Ranboo in for a hug, Ranboo’s eyes burning.

“You’re gonna be fine,” he stated, large arms warm and solid around Ranboo’s back and Ranboo holding onto him like he might lose him if he let go. He knew. He knew, realistically, that Technoblade and Philza would be back soon, and then they’d get to go home. He knew he would be fine: Captain Puffy wouldn’t hurt him or let other people hurt him, and the therapy was a good thing. But they were still *leaving* and he just couldn’t handle that.

Technoblade pet a hand down Ranboo’s hair, then gently but firmly forced Ranboo back. Ranboo swiped at his eyes, tail curled around his leg, and tried to think of something he could say that wouldn’t sound desperate or selfish.

Technoblade unclasped his cape, making Ranboo momentarily confused before he realized that Technoblade was settling it around his shoulders, the white fur soft against his jaw. “I— Technoblade?”

“Keep ahold of that for me, will you? It’s too hot for where we’re heading, but I’m gonna need it when I get back, okay?” Technoblade fastened another one of his capes, this one with a thin fur

lining around the neck that had black spots in it, around his own shoulders.

“Okay,” Ranboo murmured quietly, hands crossed over his chest to clutch at the thick fur and nose burying into it. “I—be safe. Come back soon.”

“We will,” Technoblade affirmed as he mounted Carl.

“Don’t have too much fun while we’re gone,” Philza joked, making his way up onto Captain Puffy’s roof with Twitch on his shoulder.

“Yessir,” Ranboo returned.

“Call me Phil.”

“No sir.”

“Thanks again, Puffy. We’ll let you know when we’re headed back.”

“Sounds good. You two crazy kids be safe out there okay?”

Technoblade laughed, but it was a meaner sound than Ranboo was used to. “Sure,” he said, and then he raised his hand, and Philza spread his wings, and then the two were off, the early sun casting long shadows over a greyish-blue city.

Captain Puffy didn’t rush him.

He stared after them long after he’d lost sight.

A full body shiver finally broke him from his reverie, his chin instinctively jerking down into the thick fur of Technoblade’s cape, and he turned a half step to look at her. Between her coat and her wool and the small amount of surface area she had to lose heat off of, she seemed to be doing just fine.

“Ready to go to therapy?”

Ranboo shrugged, and started walking, relatively certain that he was, at the very least, remembering the right direction to go, if not the exact path to their destination.

Captain Puffy was getting better at fighting with the old, cold lock, and while Ranboo took his coat off and laid it over the back of the waiting room chair he left the cape around his shoulders, curling up in the seat and blanketing himself in the red fabric.

“How’re you feeling?” Captain Puffy asked as she took her seat across from him, the tufted end of his tail, his fingers, and his head the only parts of him that were visible, peeking out from the cape.

Ranboo shrugged. “Kinda numb. Kinda anxious.” He closed his eyes and rubbed his face against the soft texture, the cloak smelling like Technoblade. “Just sort of miserable, a little,” he mumbled.

“I understand. Is this your first time being left alone since Technoblade rescued you?”

Ranboo shook his head. “No. At the very start, he had to go save Philza, and he left me alone for a few days then. That’s when I bought Ranmoo,” he told her, ears perking ever so slightly at the memory of his cow. “I had to watch after Carl. It was, it was my job.” Ranboo took out his

instruction book, with yoga and sketched maps and lemonade recipes and how to pasteurize milk and sewing and there, at the start, horse care. “Technoblade gave me my instruction book so I wouldn’t forget while he was gone.”

Ranboo’s tail tip twitched, remembering how *happy* he’d felt over receiving such a simple gift. A blank notebook, given for a purpose, but it had meant so much when he’d had so little. He pulled it inside the cape and hugged it to his chest, swallowed up by the red fabric like the rest of his little ball of a self was.

“But, never since then.”

“It’s a pretty big change. Do you think you could try to verbalize what’s got you upset about this, for me?”

Ranboo shrugged one shoulder. “I just...” Ranboo fiddled with the furred neck of Technoblade’s cape. “I dunno. I’m just...” he mumbled, searching for a way to put it into words. “**I want their presence**, I’m upset they’re gone.”

Captain Puffy blinked at him. “I didn’t quite catch that first part?”

Ranboo shrugged again, feeling a mote of frustration that he squashed down. “I guess I miss them already?”

“That’s entirely fair.”

“What, um, what are we supposed to talk about for therapy, today?” he asked, not-so-subtly changing the topic.

“Well, if you’re up for it, I’d like you to tell me about your life before Techno and Phil. As much of it as you’re comfortable sharing, and can remember.”

“Ah.”

Ranboo took out his memory book. He, admittedly, didn’t remember a lot.

But he told her what he could. The happier things, like Carnation, and mining. The less happy things, like how he was always on his master’s last nerve, and how the other servants and slaves didn’t want to associate with someone so frequently in trouble.

“That sounds lonely,” Captain Puffy said sympathetically.

Ranboo shrugged again, drawing Technoblade’s cape in a little tighter around his shoulders. “It was, I guess.”

“Ranboo, have you ever had friends your own age?”

Ranboo shrugged again. “Not really. If I did, they would’ve been before my memory book.” Ranboo lifted the book slightly, then pulled it in closer to his chest. His entire brain, all of his memories, were in these pages. Most people had skulls and inborn survival instincts to protect theirs, all he had was a worn leather cover.

“I was worried you’d say that. Yeah, I’m gonna add ‘making friends’ to our list of goals for you.”

“Technoblade and Philza are my friends,” Ranboo protested mildly.

“Your *own* age,” Captain Puffy clarified. Ranboo let out a small vocalization and nodded.

“Do you... know how I would do that?” Ranboo asked hesitantly. “Making friends, that is?”

Captain Puffy looked up from her notebook, and gave him a weird half smile that looked more sad than smiley.

“Well, it starts by talking to people your own age, and figuring out who you like spending time with and want to spend more time with.”

Ah. Communication again, Ranboo’s enemy. It seemed like most of what Captain Puffy wanted Ranboo to do was communicate with others, and that seemed kind of like a lot.

“I’m. Not very good at starting conversations.” He brushed his thumb over the thick white fur.

“Well, how about this. Tomorrow, instead of coming here for therapy, we can wander around town and you can practice talking to people, like merchants or asking passerby for directions. I’ll stick around nearby so if it looks like you’re starting to flounder or have a bad time I can step in, so that way you don’t have to feel as anxious about it.”

Ranboo felt another swell of gratitude, that he had people in his life who were willing to go through such a headache to help him with something that should’ve probably been easy. He ducked his head. “Thank you,” he said, biting back the apology he wanted to give, for inconveniencing her so. “For, um. For being willing to do all that for me.”

“You’re welcome! Okay, that’s a plan man! Tomorrow is ‘conversation starter practice’ day.”

Ranboo giggled weakly, her energy contagious but his entire body still feeling kinda heavy and mopey. Fortunately, Captain Puffy seemed to get that, and she called an end to their session much earlier than the previous days. Ranboo was glad; between losing his friends for a-week-to-two-weeks and talking about his time with his master, he was already ready to go back to bed.

Captain Puffy let him, and he curled up in the cape and wished Max had stayed behind with him, or even Carl so he could go flop on top of him in the stable. Bitterly, he once again felt jealous of the dog, that he’d been able to go with them and Ranboo had had to stay behind. He sighed and pressed his nose to the thick fur. Being jealous of the animals was probably not a good thing, regarding his whole therapy-recovery stuff. He could ask Captain Puffy about it when he woke back up later.

He did not remember it when he woke up from his nap, and Captain Puffy let him know there were leftovers on the stove he could reheat if he was hungry for lunch.

Funnily enough, Ranboo didn’t really have an appetite.

He wandered about the captain’s house listlessly for a bit, almost considering just... going back to sleep, when Captain Puffy set a worn textbook down on her dining room table.

“Hey, Ranboo, how good are you at math?”

“Uh.”

And so he found himself working his way through basic addition and subtraction problems, exercising a mental muscle that got pretty little use, if he was going to be entirely honest with himself. He really only used numbers when it came to their inventories, and he generally just... *counted* that instead of doing, like, formal math.

He made it all the way to a multiplication table when he decided actually, that was enough math for today. Captain Puffy could continue her efforts to educate him tomorrow. Fortunately, she laughed when Ranboo said that.

“Do you wanna read a book? We could go for a walk, hit up the bakery, go say hi to Sam, I could put some music on, you could help me with an old quilting project I started and never finished; whatever you want bud.”

“Reading or music sounds nice.”

“Okay! Most of my books are in my room upstairs, you’re welcome to whichever of them you want.”

Ranboo nodded, and entered her room hesitantly. She’d literally *just* given him permission to be there it was fine that he was there he was allowed to be there. Touching nothing, feeling like his feet on the carpet were too intrusive, he crossed to her two little neat bookcases (he noted that the top shelves were bare. He recalled that she was significantly shorter than him).

He pulled out a book about a wooden soldier and redstone ballerina figure. The art on the cover was very pretty, and he was delighted to find that when he curved the pages the book had an illumination on the fore-edge. It made the book feel old. Special. He curled up with Technoblade’s cape and the book and wedged himself into the corner of Captain Puffy’s couch, where he remained as Captain Puffy wrote in some sort of nautical journal on the table nearby.

Their time was quiet, the fire burning low to embers and the wind occasionally rattling the windows. Ranboo realized, when Captain Puffy got up and reheated food for herself, that he hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and so should probably do that, and afterwards he put more wood on the fire and returned to the honestly gripping tale of a little wooden soldier who wanted nothing more than to protect his redstone ballerina from the cruel machinations of the nutcracker.

It was dark outside when his communicator clicked on.

“Ranboo?”

“Technoblade!” Ranboo exclaimed, probably way too loud and kind of startled. He hadn’t been expecting—

“Hey. Just wanted to check in with you. How was your first day?”

“Oh, oh, um,” Ranboo lifted a hand and cradled the ear that had his communicator, even though it technically did nothing regarding the sound quality (redstone communicators were quite advanced). He. Hadn’t expected a call. He hadn’t thought he’d hear from them at all, until they got back.

“Alright, I guess. I miss you. And Philza, um, if you, could tell him?”

“I’m here, Ranboo,” Philza said, and oh, right, group feature, Ranboo was pretty sure there was a way to tell if that was on or not but right then he was more concerned with the fact that his friends were calling him and talking to him and checking up on him. “We miss you too.”

“Philza does. I, however, am a paragon of indifference.”

“He’s been worrying himself into fits if you’re alright or not all day.”

“A *paragon* of indifference.”

Ranboo giggled, something tight-hard in his chest loosening a little, and he gripped a handful of cape in his free hand. “I, uh, I’m okay. I’m happy you called.” And indeed, his tail was twitching against the couch, the tip thumping lightly. “Are you two, um, alright?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. We’re camped outside the city walls for the night.”

“Tomorrow we’re gonna give a warning for people to pack their shit and get the fuck out if they want to live. We’ll call you tomorrow night and the night after, but then we’re gonna need to go radio silent for a while until we’re done here.”

“Just gonna commit some minor acts of terrorism, but it’s gonna require our attention.”

Philza splutter-laughed, Twitch cawing close enough that Ranboo heard them. “Oh yeah, ‘minor,’” Philza guffawed, and Ranboo chuckled weakly as well.

Two more days. Then silence. But, that was two more days than Ranboo had thought he’d have, so he would cherish that.

“Um. So, until, you have to go radio silent,” he hedged, but he was supposed to ask questions, he was *supposed* to, “would it, be alright if I called you?”

“Absolutely,” Technoblade said, and Ranboo vwooped. “We’ll let you know when we need you to leave us be. What was your day like?”

“Oh, um,” Ranboo checked his memory book. “Captain Puffy wanted to know what my life was like before you two.”

Philza let out a low whistle. “That must’ve been a lot.”

“It, it was. Um. I took a nap.”

“Reasonable.”

“Then she had me do math practice, and, also I’ve been reading a story about a wood soldier and a ballerina?”

When he actually said it out loud like that, it sounded like he’d barely done anything that day. But laziness was not punishable, he knew that, he knew that.

“Oh, with the evil mustached doll?” Technoblade asked.

“Yes! That one. Um, how, was your day?” Ranboo attempted to return, because he was trying to get more conversational and he might as well start practicing with people he actually knew.

“Pretty alright, mostly just navigated the Nether. I think Max misses you,” Philza said, and Ranboo smiled a little at that.

“Could you, um, pat his head for me?”

There was a brief pause, and then Technoblade said, “He sends you a very slobbery hand in return.”

Ranboo laughed, pressing himself against the back cushion of the couch. “Thanks. Um, thank you.”

An empty silence hung on the line for a prolonged moment, enough that Ranboo fidgeted awkwardly.

“Well, alright,” Technoblade said, “Just wanted to check up on you and make sure you’re doing okay. Sleep well tonight.”

“Sleep well!” Philza echoed.

“Thank you, sleep well, stay safe tomorrow. **I love you (generalized)**, goodnight.”

“You were speaking Ender there for a second. Er, Void...tongue?” Technoblade seemed uncertain.

“It’s, Voidtongue or Voidspeak, they’re both right. And it means, ‘I care about you,’” Ranboo lied, unready to admit to what he’d truly said.

“We care about you too, Ranboo,” Philza said warmly, “Night.”

“Night.”

"Mbyyyyyyye."

The communicator clicked off, and Ranboo was left feeling warmer but somehow also achier than before.

“They call to check in?” Captain Puffy asked, looking up from her paperwork.

“Mm. They just wanted to make sure I was alright.”

“They’re good men, for all they’re bleepin’ assholes,” she said warmly.

“Why does, everyone think they’re, um, so rude? Wilbur, also says that Technoblade is, um, that.”

“It’s because Techno’s an ass.”

“He really isn’t,” Ranboo said with a frown, and Captain Puffy laughed.

“You know Ranboo, of all the things I expected you to have a spine over that wasn’t it! That wasn’t it, but you go Enderboi, you stand up for what you believe in!”

“Um, thank you, I will. Do that. Yes.”

“I think your perspective might be a little biased, though, since you’re like, the only person he’s really *nice-nice* to.”

“He was nice to Fundy! And, and to Jr., too!”

“Jr.’s a toddler, honey, and Fundy’s barely older. He *better* not be a dick to them.”

“He, he was polite to Foolish,” Ranboo pointed out.

“Foolish was here for like ten seconds and then he had to leave again.”

“Um, um, what about, the king?” Ranboo genuinely could not remember the interaction that had happened there, but he was *pretty* sure it had been good natured?

“Techno and Phil keep Eret on the straight and narrow using threats so thinly veiled they might as well just come right out and say that they’re threatening him, and Eret takes it well because they’re an actually responsible person who appreciates having people who will tell him if he’s being dumb and will step in if they cross a line. It’s a civil work relationship but Techno *is* definitely the biggest threat to their life and well-being.”

“That, uh...” Was Ranboo supposed to be aware of that? “They’re! Nice to, the um, the bakery lady!”

“Niki?” Captain Puffy asked, a frown creasing her brow. “Do they *know* Niki or was she just like, another vendor? With really good bread, like, so good, that cinnamon roll you had the other day was from her bakery, and so are the sweet rolls they brought me as a hostess gift. I’m off track; do they know her?”

And oh dear, because Ranboo had noticed that they’d overpaid her, and Technoblade had told him to never bring it up again, and he hadn’t brought up the emeralds but he also hadn’t known that Captain Puffy didn’t know they knew Niki?? This was all getting horribly convoluted horribly quickly. So Ranboo answered honestly.

“I, don’t know? They seemed, to like her, when we went to her bakery? And she seemed friendly with them?”

Captain Puffy waved, “Well she’s friendly with everyone so I don’t think that counts. I’ll have to ask them if they know her, though, crazy small world if they do.”

“O-oh?”

Captain Puffy grinned. “Well, provided too much didn’t change while I was abroad, Niki and I have been courting each other the last year and a half or so. I was actually hoping that once you’re a little more comfortable I could leave you alone for a lil while and take her out on a date, or maybe she could come over here.”

“Oh, that, would be nice! Either way. Um, I would be happy to see her again, but, I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your date.”

“Noooo, no no no, it wouldn’t be anything fancy anyway.”

Wasn’t that the point of a date? Ranboo was not good at romance, but he knew it was a big important deal to other people. But Captain Puffy—but...

Had he had this line of thought before?

Eh, probably.

Not too long after, Captain Puffy bid him goodnight, and he went to the guest bedroom.

All alone.

Even before he'd been welcomed into the bed, he'd at least been in the same room as other people. And when he hadn't, he'd had the dog to curl up around. Since Technoblade had rescued him, the only time he'd truly been alone at night was when Technoblade had been off saving Philza.

That had been... multiple months ago, now.

The room was so quiet.

He pressed his nose to Technoblade's cape and inhaled the familiar scent, then worried that it might not smell like him anymore by the time he got back. For now, it did though. For now it did, and the smell was enough to help his brain past the quiet and the loneliness and the cold of just him and the cape and the blanket, and it took longer than usual (even though he was tired), but he did manage to fall asleep.

But the new day brought with it a new task, and Ranboo had conveniently forgotten that he'd agreed to practicing how to start conversations with strangers, that day.

"Ah," was all he said, when Captain Puffy reminded him.

She pat at the small of his back, which was the only part of him she could conveniently reach without having to stretch her arm way up. "You'll be fine; I'll be right there with you the whole time, remember?"

Ranboo nodded, swallowing. Okay. Okay, he had this.

They stepped out of Captain Puffy's front door and Ranboo pulled his coat in closer. He'd forgone Technoblade's cape for the day, not wanting it to get lost or torn or dirty (and maybe hoping that if he didn't wear it around constantly, it wouldn't lose its comforting smell). His ears swivelled at all the early city noises, heard even from the more residential area Captain Puffy's house was nestled in.

"Okay, so unless you've got anything you're just dying to try out, I'm gonna double task and use you to run errands today as well."

"That's fine," Ranboo said, tail flicking about his legs, but not curled around them, not quite. He could do errands. Errands that involved talking to people, but maybe framing it as a task or chore would make talking to strangers a little easier for him.

Captain Puffy led him towards a busier area, smells of hot metal, cooking food, and horse manure blending together in something that was, altogether, rather pleasant. She handed him emeralds and a small list of items, having circled the group at the top, and informed him that all of these could be purchased from the veggie stand with a very wrinkly old man sat on an upturned bucket behind it.

Please don't let him be cantankerous, Ranboo silently hoped.

"Um, hello sir," Ranboo greeted, approaching the wooden stand with its boxes and baskets full of brightly colored produce. Conversation initiated: success!

"Why hello there," the man greeted with a creaky drawl, his weathered face pulling up in a near-lipless smile. Ranboo smiled back instinctively. Oh, Captain Puffy had probably picked an easy one

for Ranboo's first try, that would make sense. "What're you looking for today?"

"Ah, yes, that's," Ranboo fumbled a little, unfolding the singular fold in the list Captain Puffy had given. "I would like, um, four carrots, a zucchini, a yellow squash, two red bell peppers, and two green ones?"

"Good choices, good choices, you know, I grow all these vegetables myself," he said, slapping both hands down on his knees and rising with old-man slowness from his seat. Oh! There was a little furnace right next to the bucket, that was good, that way he wouldn't get too cold, that's good.

"That's impressive," Ranboo said, for lack of anything better to say, and also because it was. Ranboo liked his little "field" back home, but the man had quite a lot of produce.

"Ha! Admittedly, my grandchildren help, when I can make 'em. My grandson has no respect for the art, you know, no respect, just wants to run around chasin' bugs and playin' with that no good slingshot of his. My granddaughter's a little easier to persuade but I think she just likes dirt."

"Oh," Ranboo intoned. Except, hm, that wasn't very, 'conversational,' "I've uh, never had a slingshot."

"And a good darned thing," the man said, examining his carrots and placing four into Ranboo's open palms. "Nothing but trouble, that nonsense. Ah, but you seem like a polite boy."

"Thank you sir. You, um, seem like a kind man?"

He guffawed, and pat Ranboo's arm with a weird firmness, for all that the skin of his hands was kinda loose and soft. He set a zucchini in his hands. "Thanks, lad. So you're new around these parts? Haven't seen somebody your height in quite a moment."

"Oh, yes, I'm, visiting town to speak with a therapist, and also because my friends don't want to leave me alone in the arctic while they—are busy."

"Ah, the good captain helping you out?"

Ranboo nodded, shuffling the vegetation in his hands to make room for the bell peppers the man set in his arms. "Yes, she's been very helpful, and also kind. She thinks I need to practice starting conversations, more." Did it feel like he was attempting to justify him talking to the man? It kind of felt like he was attempting to justify talking to the man.

Ah well.

"You know, she's a pretty regular customer of this stand. A good woman, strong backbone, pretty short though." Ranboo did not remark that the hunched and portly man was also short. "She's got a fine taste for my carrots, she does, brings her son around every now and then. Ha. Weird little family they make. Good people, good people, they're good people. Ahhh, no, not that squash, 's got a bruise on it, here, you take this squash, that'll do a fair better."

"Thank you sir," Ranboo said, feeling awkwardly tugged along by the man's own conversational skills while he mostly listened. Also, he hadn't noticed any bruises, but to be fair he hadn't been looking.

“Alright, that should be everything.” Ranboo nodded, and handed him the emeralds. “You have a nice day now lad.”

“Thank you sir. Have a good day sir.”

“If you see my grandson while you’re about, you teach him some manners ya’hear?”

Ranboo giggled, tail fwipping at the roundabout praise. “Yessir,” he said, knowing damn well he wouldn’t teach diddly squat if he encountered some rambunctious child with a slingshot.

He trotted back over to where Captain Puffy was, leaning half-hidden behind another stall but not in such a way as to seem conspicuous, and she smiled brightly at him as he handed over the vegetables, tail wagging.

“Good job on that one! Jebediah seemed like a good, easy, entry-level kind of conversational partner for you.”

Ranboo nodded. “He was friendly. And kind of grumpy but not in a scary way, just in an old-man way.”

Captain Puffy laughed. “He definitely is that! Okay, next up on the list!”

Ranboo followed Captain Puffy this way and that, sometimes just asking for goods that were up for sale, one time asking a man to repair a pair of worn boots that had a failing sole (Captain Puffy had to step in on that one, when the man started asking clarifying questions and Ranboo had floundered, hard), and a few times Captain Puffy had him walk up to strangers who were simply milling about, to ask them for directions.

Ha. Those were the most terrifying.

But he did, to Captain Puffy’s credit, not die during any of them, which was a basic comfort but one Ranboo found himself clinging to. He talked to random strangers and started conversations with them and it didn’t kill him. Yaaaaaay.

“Okay this one I’m gonna do cause he’s a rude motherbleeper; you hang out here and chill for a minute,” Captain Puffy instructed, and Ranboo nodded with a small vocalization and moved away from the door of what looked like a shop for fishing supplies.

He breathed in deep and tried to relax a little, standing there beneath the awning. The city was well and truly in full swing, people about conducting their business, pack animals clopping along the streets, a white buzz of gossip and chatter filling the air, a creaking tree that swayed with the wind, some teens roughhousing good-naturedly nearby.

One of them stumbled enough that he dropped one of the items he was carrying, what looked to be a... golden apple. Ah. Hm. Well! Captain Puffy had wanted him to initiate conversations more, and also talk to people his own age. So.

“Um, excuse me?” Ranboo tried, picking the *golden apple* up off the ground where the boys somehow *hadn’t noticed* they’d lost something so valuable. “You dropped th—”

“Oh fuck give that back!” the taller one demanded, snatching it out of Ranboo’s hands. Which. Yes. That had been Ranboo’s intention.

“Um,” Ranboo hesitated, but that was all the hesitation the teen needed.

“Fuck are you? I don’t think I’ve seen you around before. I would remember because my memory is perfect and flawless so I think I would remember seeing a big man like you wandering around. Why the fuck are you so tall?”

Oh! “Oh, your, memory is perfect?”

“Damn fucking right it is. I’m a big man, and you know something I don’t like how fucking tall you are I find that personally offensive.”

“Um. Sorry?” Ranboo kinda wanted to go back to talking about the memory thing though.

“I also don’t like your accent,” said the loud one, which was a shame, because Ranboo liked his accent. It reminded him of Philza’s. “It’s very western and I don’t care for it. And why,” the teen’s voice kept pitching up high and squeaky before lowering back down loud and grating, “why are you so fucking *tall*? Prime’s sake it’s like talking to a *boo*-gey man. Is that what you are, a boogey man?”

Uh.

“Um. Probably not? I’m, half Enderman.”

The loud one scoffed.

The shorter blond seemed to be quiet only because he was biting back laughter, which was just about the only thing that kept Ranboo from losing his goddamned mind. Or! Maybe he was in shock! That could also be it, mhm, that could also be it.

The two made an interesting pair. One had short cropped hair that stood up nearly straight, swooping a little to the side, with a red coat and grey *athletic shorts* of all things, despite the cold, and red and white athletic shoes. The other had thin, straight blond hair that fell around his cheeks in a cherubic fashion, a green shirt barely visible beneath the neck of his thick brown coat, actual pants, and boots. They were wearing matching handkerchiefs, the loud one around his neck, the short one around his arm.

“Excuse him,” the short one interjected, sparing Ranboo further insult. “He was improperly socialized as a child.” Oh hey, Ranboo too! “I’m Tubbo.”

“Hello, Tubbo, I’m Ranboo,” he returned hesitantly, shaking the small outstretched hand. Or maybe it was normal sized. Maybe Ranboo was just big.

“Tubbo you’re so fucking rude to me you know that?” the other said, high pitched and quiet and frowning at his friend in offense. “You’re really just the worst.”

“His name is Tommy.”

“Hello—”

“Okay but you don’t get to call me that I don’t know you. I don’t know you only people I know get to use my name. I’m what is called a, ‘Very Big Deal’ around these parts you have to earn it.”

That made sense.

“Oh, okay, uh, what should I call you in the meantime?” Calling him ‘sir’ seemed a little strange, given that the boy seemed Ranboo’s age or younger, though Ranboo had been calling free people ‘sir’ his whole life except now *he* was free too which meant he didn’t have to and even as a slave names were still a thing he used and—

“You can call me ‘Alpha Male,’” Tommy said smugly.

“Ah.”

Hm.

“I... don’t think I’ll do that.”

“YoooOOOUuuuu motherfucker,” Tommy shouted, making Ranboo step back, tail poofed, but Tubbo’s hand on Tommy’s shoulder prevented him from advancing on Ranboo. “You’re a very rude person you know? You ought to call me ‘Alpha Male.’ That is non-negotiable. I don’t like that you’re a man, also, I’m a big fan of *women* big big fan, I’m a very big man and women enjoy me also—”

“We’re going to go check out the new construction work down near the western wall, want to join us?” Tubbo asked, speaking over Tommy like this was a very regular occurrence to have one conversation while Tommy continued to have a different one simultaneously. Not. Uh. Not that there was a lot of dialogue. Happening on the Tommy front. More like a monologue.

“—because I am very flawless and funny. I am very funny everyone agrees about that and also likes me—”

“Um.

“—which I actually have in writing—”

“C’mon, it’ll be fun. We’re going to harass Sam, which is one of Tommy’s favorite hobbies.”

“—I don’t like harassing Sam I like trolling him. *Trolling* him, Tubbo, because coincidentally I am also a very good troll.”

“I, I don’t know if I should—”

“Awwwwww, don’t be a boomer, come with us!” Tommy demanded, and Ranboo. Uh. Was not historically very good at saying no. His one halfhearted attempt now thwarted, he found himself tugged along by Tubbo.

“Um, Tom—er..... Alpha...”

“Holy shit he actually did it,” Tubbo remarked quietly, almost too quiet to hear over Tommy’s sudden, “YEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH THAT’S RIGHT ALPHA MALE!!!”

“Um.”

“Go on then, say it again,” Tommy prompted, grinning almost manically.

Ranboo wasn’t gonna do that. “If you, um, don’t like that I’m tall, and, my accent, why am I here?”

“I also don’t like you because you are a man that is a very important detail not to be left out.”

“He doesn’t actually hate you, he just talks a lot of hot air.”

“I do not. Tubbo, you’ve got to stop undermining me, it’s very rude.”

“I definitely know what that word means.”

“You’ve gotta stop saying shit that makes it sound like I’m dumber than I actually am.”

“But you are dumb!” Tubbo proclaimed brightly, and Ranboo flinched at the bout of yelling it very predictably brought about.

Tubbo’s hand was very small and warm in Ranboo’s. He didn’t quite have to stoop like he did for Fundy, but Tubbo definitely had to lift his hand up in order to continue dragging Ranboo along behind him. Were it not for the fact that Ranboo really had not agreed to come along, and also the fact that Tommy just... *Did Not* stop yelling, this would almost be nice. Ranboo’s fingers curled around Tubbo’s small hand just a little tighter.

A chill breeze kicked up off the river port along the northwestern border, the walls of the city giving way to the broad natural barrier. Ranboo hadn’t been to this area of the city before. The trio crested a hill, an old but well-loved looking sheepdog lifting its head off its paws as it sat on its owner’s porch, and Ranboo blinked at the very *large* structure that was being built, still mostly scaffolding and support beams.

“What is that?” Ranboo asked Tubbo quietly, not wanting to set Tommy off again but wanting to know (and he had been *told* to ask questions when he had them).

“We dunno yet. That’s why we’re going to go check it out.”

“Ugly fucking thing innit?” Tommy asked, hands shoved in his coat pocket and breath misting.

“I dunno, we’ve barely seen it.”

“Yeah it’s got a lot of potential, could look nice, I just think it’s ugly *now* is all,” Tommy backpedaled, and Ranboo tilted his head as he examined it. It didn’t look like much of anything, to him, other than very large. He wondered what even constituted beauty vs ugly when it came to buildings.

But then Tubbo was dragging him along again, and he needed to watch his step.

They didn’t know he used to be a slave. They had no idea that he had once been a slave. There was no reason for them to suspect that he was anything other than a free young adult, same as them, on the same footing, in the same peer group. No reason to even suspect it. He was walking around collarless, well-clothed, fed, no leash nor master in sight. They were treating him as they would any other teen, similar to how they treated each other.

Tommy was so *loud*.

For whatever reason though, it wasn’t making Ranboo scared like he normally got. It wasn’t that he was unafraid, he definitely did still feel scared, but that was only half the emotion. He was also—he felt weird, he felt weird, he didn’t know what he felt, he felt. Too much, sort of, from the noise and the cold and the fact that it wasn’t really his idea to be there in the first place.

But, admittedly, now he was indeed curious about the structure, so Tubbo wasn't even really pulling anymore as much as he was just holding Ranboo's hand.

It got bigger and bigger the closer they got, and Ranboo marvelled at it. How would a building that tall even support its own weight?

"Sam! Hey-hey, big man!"

"Tommy," Sam greeted without turning, Ranboo having to search a second before realising Sam was standing on ground-level, at a small table with blueprints laid out over it. He set a weight on the pages and then straightened, turning towards the trio. His eyes widened briefly.

"Tubbo, Ranboo. Didn't expect to see you in with these two."

"We peer pressured him into it," Tubbo stated with a calm joviality.

"Hi Sam," Ranboo greeted, waving with his free hand. Was it a weird coincidence that the Sam that Tubbo and Tommy wanted to troll was the same Sam that Ranboo knew? He felt like that was a weird coincidence. This city was very large, surely there had to be more than one Sam.

"Where have you beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeen!?" Tommy demanded, gripping onto Sam's arm and hanging off it like a light post. Sam was just about as immobile.

"In the Badlands, where I usually am when I'm not here," Sam answered, and Ranboo got a sneaking impression that he'd answered this question multiple times before.

"Well I think those lands are bad and that you should live here more," Tommy demanded.

"Good news," Sam said impassively, "The king employed me for a rush order, so I'm sticking around for a little while." Sam used his secondary arms to lift Tommy up off his person and set him down in front of him. "I'm going to be focusing on this though."

"Boooooooo!!! What even is this?"

"It's massive," Tubbo remarked.

"It's going to be transitional housing, and then likely turned into a hotel of some sort. The king is expecting an influx of settlers needing somewhere to stay, in the very near future."

Hm. Did Ranboo know about that? He felt like he knew about that. He squinted, trying to connect this dot to something else in his fickle memory.

"You should name it the 'Big Innit Hotel.'"

"I'm not going to do that, Tommy."

"Why the hell not?"

Honestly it was kind of impressive how Tommy kept managing to make his voice pitch up all high and whiny like that. If Ranboo tried to do that he was pretty sure he'd hurt himself.

"So how do you know Sam?" Tubbo asked blithely as he watched Tommy continue to treat the four armed man like a jungle gym.

“He’s a friend of my friends. He showed me how some of his redstone stuff works,” Ranboo announced proudly, warming at the memory of learning at the man’s knee.

“Oh sick; Sam’s real smart. We know him because he will sometimes attempt to make Tommy behave himself.”

“To minimal success,” Sam mentioned.

“Damn right!” Tommy said proudly from his half-upside-down perch.

“You know, someday someone is going to convince you to actually listen to them.”

“I listen to you; the things you have to say are just stupid is all. Hey, name the hotel after me.”

“No.”

“Tommy does have somebody he listens to though!” Tubbo announced, and Ranboo bristled slightly at the tone. Almost like he was being sneaky, or perhaps that he simply had a joke. The weird tension static in the back of his brain ebbed back in.

“That’s right, I listen to Tubbo!”

“No, I was talking about Wilbur.”

Ranboo’s ears perked. What were the odds that this Wilbur in the Central Kingdom was also Philza’s Wilbur who lived in the Central Kingdom?

“That’s right! I am a *protégé*, I have a mentor now and we are basically like brothers,” Tommy shared gleefully, over-pronouncing his b’s and dragging out the “uh” in “brothers.”

“I still think he’s going to secretly plan your murder,” Tubbo stated ominously, cheerfully.

Hm! Ranboo didn’t like that!

You know Tommy might have been very loud and agitating but Tubbo was, despite being quieter, perhaps even more offputting, which wasn’t a great thought to have, given that his hand was still firmly attached to Ranboo’s. Ah. Ha. Cool, cool cool cool, well, Sam was here, he was in theory a responsible adult, mayhem was probably less likely. Hopefully.

Ranboo was not listening to the very loud and incited words coming out of Tommy’s mouth in Tubbo’s direction, half-started and aborted sentences(?) about Wilbur, and Tubbo not understanding the bond they shared and being very offensive and Tommy was a big man and Wilbur was an even bigger and cooler man and Tubbo was just jealous but Ranboo *was* paying attention to the fact that Tommy screaming angrily in his general vicinity was making the hair on the back of his neck stand up and something tight and hot and tense crawl up the back of his throat and behind his eyes with singing tension and hm Ranboo was maybe less than happy about this arrangement this was kind of A Lot.

“Tommy pipe down or go somewhere else.”

“Make me you bitch.”

Ranboo didn’t like that he was calling Sam a bitch!

Tommy was a very rude boy, Ranboo decided!

His ear was flicking, twitching really, an involuntary movement Ranboo had to lift a hand and cover in order to make the flicking stop. This had the added bonus of making Tommy slightly less loud.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Sam said, lifting Tommy off the ground and carrying him out of the construction area.

“Hey, wait, no, no no no, hey, stop okay I’ll stop I’ll stop hey time out wait wait wait!”

“Nope. You need to go somewhere else for a little while, we can hang out later.” Sam raised a hand from his secondary limbs. “Foolish. I’ll be right over.”

Ranboo looked, and oh! There was Foolish. Approaching them. Ha. The man was just as intimidating as last time they saw one another.

“At least name the hotel after me.”

“Tommy, I’m not naming the hotel after you.”

“Come onnnnnnnnnnnn!”

“No,” Sam said exasperatedly, setting Tommy down on the path. “Go play somewhere else.”

“Don’t talk to me like that. I’m not a *child*.”

“You’re a big man, I know. But Foolish and I are on a *rush job*, Tommy, I can’t be doing this today.”

“Worse news about that,” Foolish said amicably as he neared the group. “No one was expecting as large an order as we’re trying to make, we’re down a serious amount of materials for how big we’re planning this. We might need to consider downsizing.”

"I warned His Majesty about that," Sam confirmed, "He was adamant we not cut corners or sacrifice quality."

"You know a very *quality* name that you could give it Sam you know what would be very Quality?"

Sam sighed.

"Tell you what Tommy. You actually go mining or logging and help us get the materials to build this thing, I will name the hotel after you."

"BOYS WE HAVE A NEW PLAN FOR TODAY!"

Oh! Ranboo liked going mining! He could do that! Maybe a bit less on the logging front...

“Okay, you go do that Tommy.” Sam seemed to hesitate momentarily. “And thank you for offering to help out.”

Tommy beamed.

“Okay, bye Sam! Bye other guy! Bye Callahan!” Tubbo shouted, tugging on Ranboo’s hand and leading him away.

A cervitaur with big reindeer antlers waved at Tubbo, and Ranboo almost felt like he recognized him. He gave Sam a little wave, and nodded respectfully at Foolish, and allowed himself to be drug along by Tubbo and Tommy, who were now discussing the idea that if Tuboo helped him get resources, Sam should name it the Bee Innit Hotel.

“We should eat first though,” Tubbo mentioned, and oh, yeah huh, Ranboo was kind of hungry. Hm. Oh, or he was very hungry.

Who knew getting pseudo-kidnapped by a pair of strangers could work up such an appetite?

“Okay, let’s go find someone to rob who isn’t me, because I am *not* sharing my golden apple,” Tommy said, casting a nasty look Ranboo’s direction, and if Ranboo had hackles he would be raising them.

“I didn’t want you to!” he defended, “I was giving it *back* to you!”

“A likely story! Hey, do you like kebabs?”

Oh Ranboo did like kebabs.

This was. Strange. Ranboo perched on a large boulder and ate a kebab that Tubbo handed him, having no idea where the boy acquired it whilst Ranboo listened to yet more of Tommy’s very loud rambling. This was strange. Ranboo wasn’t sure if it was strange because he was poorly socialised and didn’t really have anyone he could consider peers, or if it was strange because Tubbo and Tommy were strange. Or both! Both would definitely be an option, maybe.

But Ranboo had never really just... been out wandering before. If he was out, it was generally for some intent or purpose. But the two boys he was with seemed more than happy to just meander around, heckling random yard chickens they passed by and balance walking along stone fences and asking Ranboo asinine questions that had nothing to do with anything. They spent Universe-knew how long just... walking. Chatting. Occasionally Tommy or Tubbo would shove at the other playfully. Sometimes Tubbo would set off firecrackers that made Ranboo’s tail poof out and sometimes Tommy would take things that weren’t his, only to put them back a few moments later. (Ranboo understood; since unlocking his capabilities he’d taken to picking up blocks just to pick them up, and setting them down later).

He still wasn’t totally sure how he felt about being dragged into their little mini parade around the city. But it. Was kind of nice. It was nice if you didn’t think too hard about it. It was nice like Technoblade and Skeppy wrestling was nice, if he mentally squinted and didn’t pay attention to how scary the way Technoblade played was.

“Alright, I think Sam’s forgotten about us by now,” Tommy announced, and Ranboo’s ears perked. Wait did Sam *also* have memory problems? “Let’s go climb up that motherfucker.”

“Hell yeah!” Tubbo agreed.

Climb up...? Wait, like, the structure of the *massive* hotel?

Oh HELL no!

“Um, maybe we, shouldn’t do—?”

“LAME! Why are you so fucking lame Ranboo don’t be a boomer!”

“Yeah Ranboo,” Tubbo urged, lifting Ranboo’s hand and draping it over his considerably shorter skull as he peered up at him, closing in on Ranboo from behind. “Heights aren’t actually all that scary; we’ll be fine!”

“And Sam can SUCK IT so let’s go!”

“AhhHhHhHh!”

“You have a lot of mobility in your ears, you know that,” Tommy said, approaching and moving his face in unusually close to Ranboo’s. Holy shit his eyes were so incredibly visible from that angle nope nope nope Ranboo was staring at the ground at the dirt at the path oh this was far too much, “Look at how far they’re pinned—”

In Ranboo’s defense, he *genuinely* hadn’t meant to.

It was just that one moment Tommy’s finger was skimming lightly along the outer shell of Ranboo’s ear and the next Ranboo had his teeth in Tommy’s arm.

He backpedalled immediately of course, blood on his tongue and Tommy’s full-barrel yell still resounding in his ears, hands up over his mouth and eyes blown wide.

“I’m sorry!”

“Jesus Christ what the HELL man!?”

“I’m sorry!!”

Tubbo was cackling.

“What the fuck was that!?”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to!!!”

“Do it again!”

“Do NOT!”

Ranboo WOULDN’T!

“FuuuuuuuuuuuuuucKING hell man!”

“Don’t touch my ears!” Ranboo cried defensively, and whaddaya know, his voice *could* pitch that high.

“Yeah bossman, that was entirely your fault,” Tubbo said around his laughter, and Tommy muttered unhappily to himself as he uncorked a pinkish potion and carefully spilled some of it over the bite mark.

“This better not be fucking infected or I’m suing you.”

Ranboo! Honestly wouldn't probably hold that against him... Not that he uh. Had money, really. Well! He had the emeralds he mined back home, technically. He guessed he sorta kept on seeing those as Technoblade and Philza's on account of them buying all the stuff for the household and Ranboo never doing anything with his emeralds, ever.

Okay so maybe he was a sue-able entity but Ranboo also hoped! That Tommy was not infected!! He hadn't meant!!! To chomp!!!!

It just. Happened.

Tubbo tugged on his wrist. "Is it just your ears that make you bite, or are there other parts of you that we shouldn't touch?"

"I, honestly would kind of appreciate it if you limited the amount of touching you did entirely," Ranboo said, and then immediately half-regretted it. He liked it when others touched him, as long as it wasn't painful, but these two people were just so *much*...

"Are your hands okay?"

Ranboo's ears flicked up slightly. "Yeah, hands are okay."

"Sorry big man, I will not touch your ears in the future but also you're not allowed to bite me in the future."

Um.

"Deal?"

"Deal."

"Sweet. Do either of you know where we are?" Tubbo asked, and Ranboo and Tommy both looked around.

Well, Ranboo definitely didn't.

"Hey yeah where are we? I don't recognize this area of the city."

Oh boy!

"Well, that's west, let's just go that way."

"Oh look at me, I'm TUBBO I know which way WEST is, fucking arse."

"It's not my fault you're Directionally Challenged," Tubbo said, and Ranboo bit down on the urge to repeat the specific way that he articulated that.

"Hmm," he hummed instead, and then let out a small Ender vocalization.

"Anyway, let's go climb the Big Innit Hotel."

"You know you're actually going to have to give Sam materials if you want him to name it that."

"Pscht. Yeah I know."

“Or what if we just keep on walking around like we’ve been doing?” Ranboo tentatively suggested.

“Booooo!”

“Yeah, boo, let’s go climbing. I promise it’s fun,” Tubbo insisted.

And, well. Ranboo was less than great about peer pressure. So.

So they went west! And they found the outer wall again eventually, and followed along it until they caught sight of the massive structure, but this time the trio approached it from behind.

“Oh pog, someone left some scaffolding here,” Tommy remarked, already climbing.

“I... I really...”

“C’mon, it’ll be fine!” Tubbo urged, hopping up and then lifting himself onto a metal beam he barely lept high enough to reach, “Don’t worry so much bossman!”

“I just. I don’t know, I, if, ahh...”

“Oh Tubbo, just leave him if he wants to be lame about it.”

Ranboo... didn’t *want* to be lame about it, he just didn’t... and he didn’t want them to *leave* him so...

“Here, just climb up on that beam to start, I’ll Guide you,” Tubbo said, sounding almost proud and still oddly articulate in random places. Tommy scoffed. Ranboo, meanwhile, did as he’d been told, reaching up to the beam that was well within his half-Ender reach and pulling himself up.

“Okay! I think that’s about enough, boys!”

Ranboo yelped and lurched forward so hard he half-spun himself around the beam, barely hanging on and his legs dangling off and flailing. Oh *shit PUFFY!!!!* He’d completely forgotten he was supposed to be running errands with her today!!!! And also just sort of forgotten about her entirely!!!! Oh!!!! Oh Ranboo was in SO much trouble!!!!

“Fuck you!!! Fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you!!!” Tommy yelled, and if they’d planned on Sam or Foolish not knowing they were here at all they were now well past that point. “Why are you fucking here!?”

“I’m here because you two little assholes need to be nice to Ranboo, and also because I’ve gotta get started on dinner soon so you boys need to wrap it up.”

“Fuck you, bitch! Ranboo why the hell do you know my therapist?!”

Ranboo looked up at Tommy from where he was still hugging around the metal beam like a kid on a tree branch. “Um. Because she is also my therapist.”

“I have multiple clients, Tommy.”

“Oh, so you’re seeing other men now?”

“Aaaaaand we’ll be talking about *that* next session.”

“No, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that, that was rude of me, we don’t need to do that, why ARE you here though how’d you find us?”

“Tommy, of all your stats, stealth is not your strongest one,” Captain Puffy said with a little half-laugh.

“Fuck you, all my stats are at the highest level. I am what the boys call a Pro Gamer.”

“Hi Puffy!”

“Hi Tubbo, nice to see you. Ranboo, I need you to wrap it up so we can head back okay?”

“Yes’m,” Ranboo said, leaning his weight all to the side and slipping off the beam, landing with a springy little thud and trotting over her.

“Aw, bye Ranboo!” Tubbo waved.

“Byeee! See you around big man!”

Ranboo waved back, still entirely unsure of how either of the two of them felt about him but feeling? Some sort of warmth? In his chest? For them????

“Bye you two, stay out of trouble ya’hear?”

“We do what we want, bitch!”

“Tommy, what the hell, get down from there!” Sam called, sounding profoundly exasperated as he approached the group from around the pile of bricks laid out on a pallet.

“Scatter!” Tommy yelled, Tubbo already letting out a happy whoop and dropping down from his own perch. Sam halted in his advance as they ran away laughing, gas mask whirring, and ran his hand through the dark green hair atop his head.

“Hey Sam!”

“Hey, Puffy,” he sighed.

“You good?”

“Busy. The multiple interruptions is not helping with the stress level.”

“Alright, want me to head out and let you get back to it?”

“Please. Hey, Ranboo, have a good one.”

“Um, have a good one,” Ranboo parroted hesitantly, feeling heavy guilt at having clearly upset the man. But then Captain Puffy was walking away and Ranboo got to feel guilt over *her* too and wasn’t there just such an array of options for him to feel anxious and guilty over!

“Um, I’m, sorry, that I left,” Ranboo said hesitantly. She didn’t look mad, or sound mad, but Ranboo was—in some part of his brain—adamantly certain that she must be furious with him.

“It’s okay! Tommy’s easy to follow; I knew where you were. And it looked like you were making friends! Sorry I didn’t intervene around the bite, I was too far back to step in before it happened and by the time I was in range you’d looked like you’d more or less settled it on your own.”

Ranboo burned with embarrassment. She’d *seen* him bite him! Captain Puffy’s earlier words, about talking about that next session, sent a prickle of nausea through him. Surely Ranboo couldn’t just *bite someone* and not face any consequences for it. Maybe Captain Puffy just wanted to give a level-headed, thought out scolding, so Ranboo really understood what he’d done wrong.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again, trailing close on her heels.

“Hey, it’s okay. Hey, you were having fun, right? It looked like you were having fun, at least most of the time.”

Ranboo blinked, and tried to think about it. Yes, it hadn’t been his idea to tag along with them, and they were... pushy, at times. But. For the vast majority of the day...

“It was kinda nice,” he conceded, pulling on his fingers until the knuckles popped and his tail curled around his legs.

Captain Puffy beamed up at him, and Ranboo weakly returned a small smile. “Good! I’m glad you’re making friends with teens your own age. Those two wouldn’t have been my first choice, but at the end of the day they’re good kids.”

Ranboo ducked his head, warmed to know that he’d done right, that he’d pleased Captain Puffy somehow, even if he was still convinced that a stern talking-to was in his future.

He had no idea what route they took or how they got there, but somehow Captain Puffy led him straight back to her home, and he hadn’t even realized how used to the cold he’d gotten until he set foot inside and felt the warmth of the house. And that was with them having been gone all day, with no one to stoke the fires! That was the first order of business, as they settled back in for the night, getting the firewood kindling and the stove on.

Ranboo changed out of his clothes into his nightwear, figuring he wasn’t going anywhere for the rest of the evening, and felt some piece of him settle into place as he draped Technoblade’s cape around his shoulders. He buried his face into the familiar fur, inhaling Technoblade’s scent, and let out a vwooping little chirp that devolved into little rattling chirrups and his tail wagged. He sank onto the guest bed and curled up in the red fabric, tail swishing overtop the mattress, and he felt his ears twitching.

Oh!!!! He needed!!! To write!!!! EVERYTHING!!!! Down!!!!

Then he just sort of flopped bonelessly, tail doing whatever it wanted to do but the rest of him thoroughly ready to just lie there immobile and all spaghetti-limbed for a bit. He’d had a day.

Somewhere in the back of his head, a sinister voice that sounded just like his whispered that he used to work longer days than this, on less food, on less sleep, he had no right to be tired, look at how the softness had made him *weak*.

But he had Technoblade’s cloak bundled up around him, and like a shield those thoughts did no damage here.

It was there that Captain Puffy found him a while later, something very pleasant hitting Ranboo's nose as she knocked twice and then pushed open the door (he hadn't closed it so it latched; he wasn't really used to that idea just yet).

"Hey snugglebug, you hungry?"

Ranboo mrrped and made himself get up, hands keeping Technoblade's cape close around him as he plop-popped down the stairs, tail flicking underneath the flowing fabric. He thanked Captain Puffy for the meal, appreciating how good it tasted, but was otherwise quiet.

He wished he could help her with the dishes. He wished something as commonplace as *water* wasn't painful for him.

He curled up on the couch and—Hm. He'd. Never initiated a group feature before. He tried to push his thoughts in a *Technoblade* and a *Philza* way simultaneously, tilting his head one way and then the other, and he heard the communicator click on.

He waited with baited breath for a moment, caught immobile.

"Technoblade and Philza?"

"Hey mate!"

"Halloooooo."

"Hello!" Ranboo greeted, tail thumping against the couch. "How are you?"

"Pretty pog, pretty pog. Made some announcements today, nearly got turned into a flying pincushion by a sharp-eyed guard."

"Oh!"

"Eh, don't worry mate. I'm faster than that."

"Oh..."

"So far everything's moving about as planned," Technoblade said. "How are you?"

"Good," Ranboo said, "Kind of tired. I miss you. I'm, wearing your cape right now."

"Yeah? Pog. Good that it's being used."

Good. Ranboo was doing good, Ranboo was good.

"Oh hey are you calling Techno and Phil?"

"Um, yes Captain."

"Mind if I pop in for a sec?"

"Um, can Captain Puffy talk with us too?"

"Sure."

“Yeah bring her on.”

“They say yes.”

“HEWWOW!?” Captain Puffy greeted loudly, her voice hitting Ranboo from the couch next to him as she flung herself onto it, and from his communicator, both.

“Hey mate! How’re things on your end? Taking good care of Ranboo for us?”

“Best as I can. Your boy made FWENDS today!”

“Oh pog?” Technoblade asked, and Ranboo smiled with warm cheeks and an awkward little shuffle in his seat.

“I met some boys my own age. Um. They took me with them around the city. And also were kind of a lot. But. I had fun?”

“That’s great!” Philza praised, and Technoblade made an approving noise. Ranboo glowed under their approval.

“It was very cute. I dunno if either of you know Tommy or Tubbo?”

“Uhhhhhh.”

“I don’t.”

“They’re rowdy kids. Seem to know everybody; I think Tommy’s taken a shine to your boy, Phil.”

“Oh yeah?”

“If nothing else he follows around at his heels whenever I’ve seen the two of them in the same general vicinity. And honestly today’s just about the only day I *haven’t* seen Will out and about, and I was dogging those three for like all of it. Did you take him with you two?”

“Nah, Will’s not the violent anarchy type.”

“Hey backing up a step, you were dogging them?” Technoblade asked. Oh yeah! Maybe Ranboo should’ve questioned that.

“We were practicing Ranboo starting conversations with me on standby to step in if things got unruly but then your boy just took off and made friends all on his own! I was still on standby though.”

“Sorry,” Ranboo mumbled, despite how proud Captain Puffy sounded. She reached way up and ruffled his hair.

“Just wanted to clarify.” A beat. “How’s therapy going?”

“Fine,” Captain Puffy and Ranboo answered at the same time. Ranboo winced and apologized reflexively, but Captain Puffy prompted him with a little “go ahead” movement.

“Um. Captain Puffy thinks that I should be nicer to myself, a-and um. Process? Trauma?”

“That’d be pog,” Philza agreed.

“And it’s very tiring but I think in a good way?”

“I know the feeling,” Technoblade agreed, and Ranboo rubbed his cheek against Technoblade’s cape.

“Well I just wanted to pop in and say hi and make sure you boys heard the news,” Captain Puffy announced, “Oh but hey! Do you two know Niki?”

“The baker?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, she was a good friend of Will’s growing up. We like to pop in and say hi when we’re in town.”

“Ohhhhhhhh!” Captain Puffy seemed relieved, “Okay that makes sense!”

Philza let out a little string of laughter. “What, did you think it was something else?”

“I was worried she was involved in you two’s...” Captain Puffy gestured vaguely, something Ranboo saw but his friends obviously couldn’t, “anarchy thing.”

“Naaaaah nah nah,” Technoblade assured, “Niki doesn’t seem the type.”

Ranboo very carefully did not emote anything more than mild concentration as he thought about that. Something—seemed off. But if Technoblade sounded like everything was fine....

“Okay, I was just curious. I’ll see you two around.”

“See you in a bit,” Philza returned, alongside Technoblade’s, “Byeeeeee.”

There was a pause that Ranboo couldn’t help but feel was awkward and he cleared his throat uncomfortably gripping at the red fabric of the cape.

“So what did you boys get up to today?” Philza asked, and Ranboo vwooped and took out his memory book.

He told them about approaching strangers and meeting Tommy and Tubbo, about Sam’s structure (haha, yeah, not like *we* know anything about why they’d need a rush job on temporary housing, haha)(Jesus Techno sound less suspicious), about Tubbo’s quietly ominous aura and Tommy’s explosively loud personality, about walking along a low stone fence and how holding hands was nice. Ranboo talked until he interrupted himself with a big yawn that clicked his jaw, and Philza suggested that he head to bed. Ranboo gave a little hum and bid them goodnight.

He found Captain Puffy upstairs, and bid her goodnight as well, returning again to that empty room where the only breathing he could hear was his own.

The next morning, Ranboo woke first. It was still dark out, the moon just barely starting to touch the horizon, but Ranboo wasn’t sleepy, and wouldn’t fall back asleep at this rate. So he got up, got dressed, quietly crept his way downstairs.

Distantly, his brain supplied that he would look like some sort of spindly monster like this, if anyone walked in and saw him, 8 feet tall and swallowed by shadows. But it was just him and Captain Puffy here, and she was very kind to him.

He.

Hnng.

He wanted to return that kindness.

He could make breakfast? He cooked for Technoblade and Philza all the time back home. It seemed rude to use her kitchen without asking though, especially since she would have to do the dishes. Maybe he could make something that didn't use a lot of dishes? But what if she was saving food for a special occasion and he used it and then she'd have to go get more? But he wanted to make breakfast for her, that seemed the least he could do after she'd been hosting him and his friends and feeding them so much. But what if she got mad? No, no, why would she get mad, he'd be making food for her, people liked having food made for them.

If Ranboo was Captain Puffy, and she was his guest, would he be mad about her using his kitchen? No, no he wouldn't, he'd be thankful that she made food for him.

So.

So he'd make food for her.

He nodded to himself with a little "Mh-hm" and pulled out a skillet. He grated a potato into hash and took out a couple eggs, and debated if he should fry up bacon as well. It seemed like a fitting third item that would go along well with the other two. So. Okay! Stop second guessing himself, stop stop stop, he was gonna burn the food if he kept hesitating. He fried up a couple strips of bacon and felt his ears twitch minutely at the pleasant smell that wafted off the food.

He was just turning the burner off when he heard the clop of her hooves upstairs, and felt a little flutter of anxiety. What if she *didn't* like it, or he'd made food she actually hated for some reason and he didn't know about it, or any small infinity of possibilities that she might actually get mad about him using her kitchen without permission or—

"Ranboo?"

"Good—morning, Captain Puffy." She was half-dressed for the day, in a loose shirt and trousers, and his tail thrashed once.

"Awwwwwww, did you make breakfast!?"

Ranboo nodded, nudging the plate with the slightly-larger-portion-but-not-noticeably-so along the counter closer to her. "Do you like it?" he asked, and reminded himself that he was *allowed* to ask needy attention-seeking questions. Encouraged to, even.

"YES! Omg I love that thank you sweetie! You didn't have to."

Ranboo smiled, following her with his own plate to the table and sitting down, his nerves smoothed out by her well-reception. "I know. I wanted to."

Chapter End Notes

Love language is stored in the cape.

As always, any comments/concrit/thoughts you'd like to share are treasured and appreciated!

<3

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

We are on hiatus due to upsetting life events. I will resume writing when I am no longer sad.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

So it went like this: the next day, Ranboo went to therapy and Captain Puffy made him break down the entirety of his feelings on interacting with strangers and the weird teenagers and they did yoga and she locked up. Tubbo found him out front of the therapy office and called out to him, tugged on his hand and demanded they sync communicators, and passed over the redstone register for Tommy's communicator as well.

So it went like this, they started a group conversation and agreed to meet up again tomorrow, and they would go mining together because Tommy was actually serious about getting a hotel named after him and Tubbo liked the idea of standing uselessly in the way while other people tried to work. Captain Puffy giggled as she overheard two thirds of the conversation and Ranboo, motivated by necessity, figured out how to lower the volume of certain people through his communicator.

So he followed Captain Puffy home, and she had him do word puzzles after his nap, and she asked if he would mind Niki coming over the next evening for dinner and he said yes.

So he did multiplication tables even though he struggled with them and read a short story and fell asleep in Technoblade's cape and tried not to feel like he was already getting accustomed to his "new normal" too quickly.

So it went like this, Ranboo said goodbye to Captain Puffy that next morning, having written down her home address in his instructions book as well as notable landmarks nearby, so that if he got lost he could ask for directions (in parentheses next to her address, she'd made sure to make him write down to try calling her communicator first).

So it went like this: Ranboo waited near an empty fountain, its pipes barren so the ice would not break them.

"Ranboo!"

Ranboo turned and found Tommy approaching him, the boy still wearing *athletic shorts* in the *freezing cold!*

"Hello, Tommy," Ranboo said hesitantly, tugging anxiously at the red and white scarf Captain Puffy had lent him (in truth, she'd given him a variety of options, but he'd picked this one).

"Hey heyyyyy big man! How're you doing!?"

"Okay," he said, "A little chilly." He looked pointedly at Tommy's knees, tail flicking behind him, and Tommy did not take the hint even slightly at all.

“Yeah it’s pretty chilly out innit? Hey, so, I know I yelled at you a lot last time we hung out—” yes this was true, “—but what say you come help me go mining eh?”

Ranboo perked. “Yes! That’s, what we’re doing today, right?” He hoped he wasn’t misremembering. He’d written it down.

“Right! Right, good man Ranboo, just wanted to make sure you were still on board.”

“Mm!” He nodded. “Where, are we going mining?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Well now Ranboo was going to!!! He’d just been making idle conversation but now! He was going to!

He was saved by Tubbo arriving shortly after, once again far more sensibly dressed than his companion, and the trio set off. Ranboo’s tail was wagging slightly as he trailed along with the two of them, situated in the middle behind them as they led the way. Oh hey! Tommy was walking on the same side as Ranboo’s red eye, and Tubbo on the side with his green one! Haha! Red and green, red and green, hmm hm hm mh hm mm.

Oh a mine shaft! Ranboo’s ears perked and his tail wagged just a little harder. He was glad he’d forgotten to take his pickaxe out of his inventory before leaving home (though even if he’d remembered, why would he, what if he needed to mine!). He was glad he’d agreed to come with. He hadn’t gone mining in a while, and he could already feel the siren song of a mindless and repetitive task calling out to him.

“God this is gonna be so BOOOOR-RING,” Tommy complained as they made their way down, Ranboo’s tail never faltering.

“You’re the one who wants a hotel named after you.”

“Yeah but it’s still gonna suck in the meantime. Ranboo, tell Tubbo how boring mining is.”

“Oh, actually, um, I actually, like mining a lot, actually.”

“You’re both terrible you know that? I think you are picking on me, you two are in Ka-hOOts.”

“Ka-hOOts,” Ranboo repeated under his breath, “Ka-hOOts, Ka-hOOts.”

“We aren’t. I also hate mining, but I think it’s funny watching *you* mine.”

“The WOOOOOOORST,” Tommy moaned.

Mining with Tommy and Tubbo was not like mining at home: namely that there were people there. First and foremost, that was a pretty big difference. Tommy liked to switch directions and elevations seemingly at random, Tubbo and Ranboo following along. Ranboo couldn’t zone out like he normally did, so it wasn’t really as cathartic as usual, but it was still fun!! The familiar motion was nice and gathering up stones neatly sorted into stacks in his inventory was fun. And then there was Tubbo! Who seemed to enjoy being as Actively Useless as possible. He didn’t... get in the way, uh, like, *most* of the time, but he also adamantly refused to help at all. And if Tommy or Ranboo needed to set a chest down where Tubbo was standing and offload materials to come back for later, he wouldn’t move, so one of them would have to mine a little further and the other would

have to set the chest down before Tubbo could follow along after, which Tubbo took great delight in making as difficult as possible.

It was fun though.

Ranboo took much more reliable breaks than he took at home, prompted by Tommy's complaining and Tubbo's hunger and being around people who actually had a perception of the flow of time.

"So Ranboo, what are you seeing Puffy for?" Tommy asked at one point, dirt and flecks of rock in both their hair as Tommy took a swig from his water bottle, and Ranboo ate a piece of melon.

For a moment, the honest answer was right on his tongue. That he was once a slave, and now he wasn't, that he was still unlearning a lifetime of servitude and deference and was learning how to be a person. That he struggled with communication and fear of abandonment and awful, wretched thoughts that he was no longer allowed to call awful or wretched.

But he didn't really want to tell them, these two boys who saw Ranboo as free, and had only ever seen Ranboo as free.

And he didn't want to tell them—people got, weird, when he told them.

"I have some stuff I'm working through," he answered vaguely.

"Me too man, me too. Hey, I'm not the best for it, but lemme know if you ever want to talk to someone who isn't Captain Pussy about it."

"I. Don't think you should call her that."

He was the one to say goodbye first, unprompted, unasked, many hours after they'd first met up. He'd hauled an inventory-full of resources to the front of the shaft, left in a chest for Tommy and Tubbo to further ferry out to Sam later. It wasn't necessarily that he was tired, or wanted to stop mining, or even that he was overwhelmed spending time with the two of them (though, he was hardly underwhelmed either. Tommy and Tubbo were. A lot).

But he had a phone call to make.

"Hey," he greeted softly, tugging on his scarf as he walked through the city streets. He was moving in the... vague, direction, of Captain Puffy's home. He'd worry about it later. He didn't want to arrive there just yet.

"Hey mate."

"Hulloooooo."

"Um. Tonight's, the last night, right?"

"Ayup. Tomorrow morning we start causing a lot of problems on purpose."

"We won't be able to talk until we're on our way back."

Ranboo shoved his hands in his pockets, took them out, slipped them into the opposite sleeves and held onto his own forearms, squirmed.

“Okay. Stay safe.”

“No need to worry about us,” Philza said proudly, “We’ve got this down to a science by this point. You’re going to be alright while we’re quiet on this end?”

And maybe he wouldn’t be. But. But... maybe he would.

“I’ll try not to miss you too much,” he said, and it was half-meant as a joke, but to be fair it only half came out as one.

“Awwww mate.”

“We’re thinking of you too,” Technoblade said. “Stay safe on your end. Weren’t the pair of hooligans supposed to be dragging you around again today?”

“Mm. Tommy and Tubbo. We went mining. It was fun!”

Ranboo wished he had more to say.

The line hung open and quiet for a moment.

Technoblade made a noise.

“So, I’m being held hostage and forced to say this, but Phil insists I let you know that he’s been missing you a lot. Phil’s gonna try and keep the whole violent carnage part of this—hey!—*Phil* is gonna wrap things up short and sweet so—snrk-haha!—so we can get back to you soon, okay? Entirely Philza, he just won’t tell you himself.”

“Oh my god!”

“But for the record,” Technoblade said, voice dipped down a little lower. “I miss you too. Hang in there kid; we’ll be home soon.”

“Okay,” Ranboo said, voice warbly and something hot and wonky going all noodly in his chest. **“I love you (generalized),** miss you too.”

“We’ll be back before you know it,” Philza assured, “Sleep well tonight, Ranboo.”

“You too.”

“Byeeee.”

Ranboo wished they’d hung on the line a little longer. He wished he’d had more to say. He wanted to linger in it, to steal just a few more seconds, and a few seconds after that.

He called Captain Puffy.

“Hello? Um. Can you tell me how to get home from here?”

Captain Puffy guided him from major landmark to landmark, until finally he was somewhere he recognized and was very delightedly able to make it the rest of the way back.

“And you’re sure you’re cool with Niki coming over tonight?” Captain Puffy double-triple checked.

“Mhm. I might, um, not stay up as long as you two do though.”

“That’s fine, that’s fine! Niki runs a bakery so she turns in early anyway. Like I said, it’s not gonna be anything impressive, she’s just coming over for dinner and a chat.”

Captain Puffy looked nice for it, though. Well, not like, ballgowns and fancy noblemen nice, but like, nicer than her usual attire. Her hair was pulled back in a low ponytail and she had big dangly earrings and a long clanky pendant on, as well as a thick bracelet around her left wrist. She was wearing an over-the-shoulders white top with flared quarter sleeves and high waisted black pants with big-big buttons and her hooves looked like they’d been buffed.

Definitely nicer than she looked when it was just Technoblade and Philza—and Ranboo. But not something Ranboo would’ve assumed would be people’s first choice for dating. Courtship. Big fancy important blah blah blah. Bluh! What did Ranboo know! He didn’t know anybody in his own life that was in love with anybody else, and all of the peacocking involved in wooing that had happened on his master’s estate—he was beginning to feel that *nothing* that had happened in that place was a good rubric to base his understandings off of.

He should compliment her.

“You, um, look nice,” he said, trailing after her through her little home and into the kitchen.

“Thanks sweetie! I haven’t worn these ol’ ear stretchers in a hot minute. I actually almost forgot where they were.” Captain Puffy laughed at herself, and Ranboo chuckled along as well.

“I said goodbye to Technoblade and Philza on the walk home,” he mentioned, and oh, he should go grab Technoblade’s cape. “They’ve gotta go radio silent now.”

“Right, right. How’re you feelin’ about that?”

“Bad.”

Captain Puffy laughed at his frank answer, but gave him sympathetic pats on his back. “You’w be okayyyyyyyyyyyyyyy. They’ll be back soon.”

He nodded, like he always did, and then went and got Technoblade’s cape. Wait, should he have said something before just. Leaving. The room? Probably. He vwooped, let out a little vocalization, shook his head so the tips of his hair tap-tap-tapped against his nose and cheeks and skin. He blinked as his body sorted out the self-inflicted vertigo of the action, and then decided that if Captain Puffy didn’t bring it up, he wouldn’t apologize. So he was just. Having an Ender moment. It was probably not *too* rude.

Loud, happy sounds accompanied the opening of the front door, and Ranboo made his way back downstairs to say hello.

Niki also looked very nice, he noticed, as he descended and she set her coat on the hangar. A pink and yellow floral dress with a high waist and a poofy skirt that went to her knees, thick fuzzy leggings and boots with pom-poms on them. A rose-gold choker with lace and ball earrings. Cute

buns on the back of her head. Nice, nicer than in the bakery, but still hardly a ballgown. Maybe this was better, though.

“Oh and Ranboo! Hello!” she greeted, eyes scrunching up with her smile.

“Hello, Miss Niki,” he greeted, tail wagging slightly underneath the cape. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Good to see you, good to see you, here, did you like the last cinnamon roll you tried?”

Ranboo flushed that she had even remembered what he’d picked. “Yes, it, it was really goo—oh!”

Ranboo took the cinnamon roll that was held out to him, one hand on Technoblade’s cape and the other holding the still-warm pastry.

Holy shit it smelled so good.

“Sooooo Nikiiii.”

“Sooooo Puffy~” they exchanged, Captain Puffy’s arms sliding around Niki’s waist as the shorter woman got up on tiptoes and propped her chin on Niki’s shoulder.

“I have a couple different bottles of wine that have your name on ‘em, we could crack one open for tonight.”

“Did you bring me the blueberry wine?”

“Yeeeeee I gotcha blueberry wine.”

“Why Captain my *Captain*~” Niki giggled, hand dramatically pressed to her chest, and Captain Puffy pecked her cheek before she clopped downstairs to the basement Ranboo still hadn’t visited. Cellar? Basement? Ranboo didn’t know! He hadn’t visited!

Was he supposed to be eating the cinnamon roll when they were going to have dinner? Too late. Niki saw and laughed at him though, which was a nice sound and not a mean sound so it didn’t feel like she was laughing *at* him, and Ranboo’s tail fwip fwip fwipped under the cape.

“How are you?” he asked, because he was getting better at conversations and just a tiny bit eager to show that off.

“I’m well, thank you for asking! How are you, Ranboo?”

She was so. Lovely.

“I’m okay. I’ve been making friends.”

“Oh that’s good! Who with?”

“Um, Tommy and Tubbo.”

Niki’s expression briefly fell. “Well, whenever you’re with them I’d appreciate if you could steer them and their sticky fingers away from my bakery. But that’s good you’re making friends though. Tubbo can be very polite when he wants to.”

Ranboo was pretty sure that was a “backhanded compliment” but he wasn’t gonna argue it too hard.

They *were* rude.

Tommy more than Tubbo.

Uh.

By a lot.

“I’ll, uh, try my best.”

“How are you liking the Central Kingdom so far?”

“Oh! It’s, nice, I think. This city is very big.”

“Mmm, it’s the capital.”

“It’s, also cold, but, not as cold as back home, which is nice, I think.”

“Oh? How cold is it where you live?”

Captain Puffy’s hooves could be heard on the steps.

“Um. Cold? Er? Than here? I, I don’t know how to tell the temperature, but, it’s very cold, and, it snows a lot, and, if you tried to wander around in athletic shorts you’d probably die.”

Niki nodded, and her attention moved fluidly from Ranboo to Captain Puffy as she rejoined them, two glasses in one hand and a large green bottle with what looked like purple fluid inside. Ranboo had only ever heard of wine made out of grapes, but he guessed it made sense that if you could make wine out of one fruit you could make it out of others, too. Wait, cherries. Had he heard of cherry wine before? He might have known about wine varieties before. Look Ranboo was not a wine expert okay!

Something was simmering on the stove in the kitchen, but Captain Puffy and Niki settled easily on the couch, a plate of cheese and crackers set on the low table next to a bowl of rinsed grapes. Ranboo, on account of them still being dewey with moisture, would not be partaking in the grapes. But he would make himself a mini cheese and cracker sandwich!

Ranboo became Very Aware that he knew nothing about wine when the two poured their glasses and Niki sprinkled ground cinnamon along the surfaces of the drinks. That. Seemed. Okay that seemed. Was that good??? Was that what you were supposed to do with wine???

Part of Ranboo almost wanted to try it, as he watched Captain Puffy swirl it around in the clear glass, her attention captivated by Niki’s story of her last customer of the day before closing up shop.

He ate another cracker with cheese. This was. Really good cheese, wow. He’d never had anything like it. Did Captain Puffy get this while abroad? Did it even keep for that long? He was starting to understand how this was A Date. Following on the heels of that understanding came along the thought that he was. Probably intruding, despite how much Captain Puffy had insisted he wouldn’t be.

Oh but he couldn't just stand up and *leave*, that'd be drawing attention to himself. He. Would just sit there, then. And observe.

It was.

Nice.

He'd, never really seen people be in love before. That he could remember! Just. It reminded him a lot of seeing Technoblade and Philza interacting with their friends, in the Badlands, and here, but with a little twist to it. Something... closer? Something more... secluded? It was like the air drew in tighter around the two of them, like Technoblade's cape around his shoulders, like a blanket on a cold evening. It was hard to put into words. Curious to observe.

He wondered if he would like something like that, himself. Dress up nice and give a friend cool cheese and strange beverages. He tried to conceptualize himself in Captain Puffy or Niki's position, but... hm. He couldn't think of a second person. Not that there was anyone he thought *would* come to mind, but beyond that. It was weird, trying to think of himself in the little metaphor-blanket that Niki and Captain Puffy were in now. Less that he could think of somebody specific he'd want to share it with, and more that he couldn't really picture himself sharing it at all.

Was it because he was young? Still trying to figure out how to be a person and not a slave? Because he simply hadn't met anyone? He didn't know, he didn't know.

He wrote it down in his memory book.

Something dinged in the kitchen, the pure toll of a metal bell, and conversation was abruptly halted.

The stew was garlic herb and potato with beef, bright spots of carrot or shadows of dark greens coloring it in swatches, Ranboo sat, maybe just a little bit further from Captain Puffy than he normally did, letting her and Niki have their little space at their end of the table. Okay. Okay, as soon as he was done eating he was going to make his escape.

Watching the two of them lean their heads in close and laugh and sometimes set their hands on top of one another's on the table was making him feel contemplative and he'd used enough brain energy for the day, he thought.

He was even able to slip his dishes into the kitchen without either of them noticing. Haha, stealthboo.

Upstairs, he found that his contemplative mindset did not subside. Not even sleep helped, as Ranboo drifted off to the sounds of idle conversation wafting up the stairs.

He was still thinking about it in therapy the next morning, sat sideways on his chair with his legs dangling off one arm and his long fingers fidgeting with a small, brightly colored cube that had been separated into a 3x3 grid on each side. Captain Puffy seemed to sense he had something he wanted to talk about, and let him try to gather his thoughts, taking the time to compose his musings.

"In Voidtongue," he started, hesitated, continued, "In Voidtongue, um, that is. In Commontongue the word 'love,' can be, kinda vague? It. It has a lot of meanings. But. In Voidtongue, Endermen have, a lot? Of words that, that 'love' could translate into."

"Mhm?" Captain Puffy prompted.

“So, I think, the closest equivalent would be, **love (generalized)**, where um, where it’s sort of just a step up from liking something, like, ‘oh I love strawberries,’ or ‘I love this song’ and it can sometimes apply to people too but not always? Just, like, if you’re, like it’s sort of like an intermediary step between saying you like someone’s presence and saying you actually *love* them.”

“Isn’t that a noise I’ve heard you make on the phone once before?”

Oh right not everyone’s memory sucked as bad as Ranboo’s did. His cheeks burned, but he nodded.

“I, um, told, I—you can’t, nothing I say leaves this room, right?”

“My lips are zipped,” she said, mimicking a zipper over her smile.

“I told Technoblade and Philza that I love them. B-but, I, the—” he made an Ender vocalization, and the wool on Captain Puffy’s legs stood on end and he was almost past the point where he even cared (almost, he did feel bad—he was so used to Technoblade and Philza just Not Caring he forgot he’d make the hairs of others stand on end).

He gripped his tail near the end, shuffling on the chair. “How do you—so! Voidspeak, there’s, there’s different types, right, there’s, there’s **love (familial)** for family and there’s **love (platonic)** for friends and **love (affectionate)** which can also be for friends and there’s **love (romantic)** for partners and there’s **love (platonic, romantic, affectionate, familial, any, all)** which is just, which I guess, sort of, just means, ‘profound?’ And, and, and so there are all these different types but—”

He looked at Captain Puffy somewhat helplessly, “How... do you tell them apart?”

Captain Puffy puffed up her cheeks and blew the air out slow, running a hand up into her hair and tossing it lightly. “Asking the tough philosophical questions today huh?”

“Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for hon. These are questions literally everyone asks over the course of their lives. But it also means there’s not just one easy answer that’s gonna apply to everybody.”

“Oh.”

“So, when *I* think about love, I might have different feelings than, say, when Badboyhalo thinks about love. Or when Sam thinks about love. But when I do, it’s like...” Captain Puffy held her hands out in front of her and looked up off to the left, mouth parted slightly. “It’s like, I care about them, right? I trust them, for whatever trust means from person to person. I might not trust Badboyhalo to watch over a basket of muffins without eating one, and I wouldn’t trust Skeppy as far as I can throw him, but I trust that when push comes to shove the people I care about are people I can rely on. I trust Sam to watch my back and I trust my friends will be there for me when I need them. I’m affectionate towards them, and believe they’re affectionate towards me in return.

“And I’m also making the conscious, active *choice* to commit to them. Love *is* a feeling, but more than that it’s a *decision*. And it’s an investment, you’ve gotta put work in, communicate,” ah, Ranboo’s old enemy, once again, “listen and respond to their needs, while trusting they’ll reciprocate. Love is also reciprocation! But, with regards to how you tell the difference...”

Captain Puffy sighed and slouched in her seat. “That’s a tricky one! That’s, that’s definitely a tricky one. For me, family feels... abiding? Is that a good word for it? Oh shoot now I’m doubting if I’m

even remembering that word right, haha, ummmm. Family is long-lasting. Foolish is my son and Jr. is my grandson, they're both adopted, but come hell or high water nothing's ever gonna change; those are my boys. I love them in general, but I also specifically feel like they're my family.

"Friends feel... I dunno, I care about them! They're my buddies! I like hanging out with them. Romance is just like... Friendship+ I guess? Friendship but with an extra side salad. Friendship with another breadroll. My metaphors are getting away from me. But anyway, with a romantic partner, I just... want to be near them. There is," Captain Puffy tapped her fingertips together and then sort of "pointed" at Ranboo with her steepled hands, looking to the side and over-forming her mouth shapes, "the sexual aspect as well, that's a factor for many people and a journey of exploration and self-reflection that most teenagers go through. But again, I'm speaking from personal experience. I know if you asked this question to someone who doesn't have any interest in sex, then obviously that's not gonna be a factor."

"So, to, um, ask clarifying questions," Ranboo started, and Captain Puffy made an encouraging noise, "You don't really know either?"

Captain Puffy laughed. "Yup! It's a big confusing mess for everybody, Ranboo, plus side is you can know you're not alone."

Oh well yes that was a plus.

"As unforgiving as it sounds, sometimes you just... gotta figure it out on your own. Your experiences are not universal, and neither are anybody else's. With love, *especially*, try to steer clear of thought patterns about what you 'should' and 'shouldn't' think, or feel, or do, and try focusing on discovering the way your own brain works, how your own feelings organize themselves, and what words you'd personally choose to describe your own personal experiences. If you have a friend who swears up and down that romance is all about sweeping gestures but find you like quiet shared moments, then do quiet shared moments. If someone likes pranking their friends but you prefer more harmless jokes, then seek friendships with people who also prefer harmless jokes. It's your life and your feelings, no one else can tell you how to feel them."

"That... does make sense..." Ranboo said, and fiddled with the colorful cube. "That makes me feel a little better. It's, ahha, um, not actually too different from how Endermen do it."

"Oh?"

"Um. So, Endermen—don't have blood relatives? We don't—*they* don't—um, er, I guess," Ranboo's cheeks heated. "Ah, Endermen, don't procreate. It's. Um. Th—w—Endermen, lack the hardware? S-so, all, um, all families, are, 'adopted,' except, we don't have a word for that. The closest equivalent in Voidtongue is **one I wander with**, which, isn't family specific, it more just means, someone who you've chosen to spend a portion of your life with, o-or all of your life, in, profound situations." He missed Eidvyr. She'd have a much more eloquent (and probably much more informed) way of explaining this.

Meanwhile, what did Ranboo know?

"So, when, when you become a **mentor-caretaker**, a mentor, to someone, you have to... the difference between a mentor and a parent is, dependent on what the people involved feel it is. And, and if you don't have a way to for-sure differentiate, I think. I think probably, Endermen might not actually know much more certainly, either."

Captain Puffy chuckled.

“People have always been, and will always be, people,” she said, and Ranboo blinked, then took out his notebook. That. Was a good saying. She laughed again as he started writing, but he didn’t care if it was just some meaningless saying to her it sounded *important* in his brain.

“It’s kinda reassuring though,” Captain Puffy mused aloud, “Endermen are so... enigmatic, to us. It’s nice hearing that they’ve got the same mess in their heads that the rest of us do.”

Oh. Yeah, huh. That... was reassuring for Ranboo, too. That everyone was confused, and fumbling along, and figuring it out. And maybe he had further to go than most, on account of him missing out on... 17 years worth of fumbling along, but. But he was here now. And. That was...

Yeah. That was reassuring.

He was not separate from any other living thing.

“Even the dirt. Even the void. Even The End.” he murmured quietly to himself, under his breath, and picked the colored cube back up to fidget with.

For the rest of the session, Captain Puffy wanted him to tell her about his physical reactions to distressing emotions, what his body’s responses were. He told her about how Technoblade had first met him when he was panicked and struggling to breathe. How Technoblade’s first words to him were a gentle prompting to inhale. That Ranboo was surprised he even *could* remember that at all. How normally if it wasn’t written down then the memories were lost to fog and mire but lately he’d been able to hold onto specific details and very recently he’d even been able to start recalling things he’d previously been unable to.

Captain Puffy asked him if the ability to remember things came and went in waves, like when he was hungry or tired or stressed he remembered less and when he was feeling well he remembered more. He thought that was probably right.

Captain Puffy taught him physical self-soothing tricks. Breathing patterns. A funny little nerve that existed in the center of his chest, just below his sternum, and that the reason people would dramatically place their hands on their chests when something shocked them was because that’s where the nerve was, and if you put pressure on the nerve it calmed you down. Maybe not in a super-duper-big way that Ranboo would be able to immediately feel, but in a subtle body-function way, and he could do that alongside other techniques to help himself calm down.

Pressure was another one. It was why curling up in blankets felt good when he was miserable. (It was why wrapping himself in Technoblade’s cape helped him miss them less). Squeezing a soft ball, like the one Puffy had in her little bowl of fidget tools, pressing his palms against a wall and pushing, anything that helped ground him in the here and now and forced his brain into the present so it couldn’t keep circling around the scary thing.

Ranboo was admittedly skeptical of how well some of them would work, but, eh. If even some of them did, then this was a therapy session well spent.

The next day, Ranboo went mining with Tubbo and Tommy, which after only an hour turned into Ranboo playing and not mining at all with Tubbo and Tommy. The day after, he went to therapy, the day after, he let Tubbo show him his apiary, and the day after that, he went to therapy, which ended with yoga rather than starting with it, so Tommy could do yoga with them, and then Ranboo

could leave while Tommy went to therapy. Captain Puffy made sure he knew the way home (and if he got lost, he could survive until she was done with her session with Tommy to ask for new instructions), but it turned out to not matter anyway, because Tubbo was there! Having “dropped Tommy off,” Tubbo had waited outside the door to steal Ranboo away and drag him around town.

People were starting to arrive.

Interestingly enough, Sam *had* named the temporary housing after Tommy, so Ranboo guessed they must’ve gotten enough resources (or Tommy and Tubbo had also mined on days Ranboo hadn’t seen them) for it to count. People whose whole lives were bundled up in packs and wagons were coming into the city, into the kingdom, taking up residence where they could, and Ranboo’s tail drooped every time his attention caught on one of them.

It wasn’t... it wasn’t that he was upset about what had happened, to displace them. But he was sorry, that they’d been displaced. The term “necessary evil” came to him unbidden, but he didn’t want to think about it too hard.

“Wonder where they’re all coming from,” Tubbo mused, and Ranboo did not answer.

“You know, Tommy and I came here like that,” Tubbo mentioned, and Ranboo made an inquisitive little “Huh?”

“Yeah, back a few years ago. It had always just been me and him against the world; we would run from town to town stealing what we could and laughing at anyone who tried to stop us. We got into a bunch of scrapes and people’d run us out but it wasn’t like we ever wanted to stick around anywhere anyway.”

“What changed?” Ranboo asked quietly.

Tubbo shrugged. “Dunno. Guess we’d never really had anywhere to call home before, but for some reason this place became one.”

Ranboo thought on that. He tried to imagine it, Tubbo and Tommy, younger, scrape-kneed and somehow more devious than they were even now, linked by the hands and approaching the city with the intent of causing havoc, not yet knowing it was someplace they would stay.

“...I... only recently found somewhere to call home, too.”

“Here?”

Ranboo shook his head. “No, back in the arctic. I’m just, um, visiting the Central Kingdom for therapy.”

“Ah.”

They were quiet again, a minute, observing as a family of five brought their wagon to a halt in front of a small bed and breakfast and started unpacking. Again, Ranboo felt that strange—not regret, but maybe, sympathy.

“Say big man, where’d that cape come from?” Tubbo asked, changing the subject and taking off down another path, Ranboo following on his heels.

“Oh, it’s Technoblade’s. He’s, my uh, roommate? Friend, person. He’s lending it to me right now.”

“Looks comfy. Like walking around with a blanket.”

“Yeah!” Ranboo agreed happily, tail wagging.

The next evening, Ranboo heard his communicator click on while he and Jr. were playing knock-the-block-tower-down as Captain Puffy watched, having agreed to babysit again that night, and he stood up so fast he startled her.

“Hello?” he answered, hands pressed to his abdomen and body positively *thrumming*.

“Halloooooo.”

“Hey mate!”

“Hey, hello, hi, yes, you’re, um, are you both okay?”

“Right as rain, mate. Just made camp for the night; we’re on our way back.”

“Oh! How, how soon?”

“We’re gonna push; ideally you should see us sometime around sundown tomorrow,” Technoblade informed, and in his peripheral he was aware that Captain Puffy was moving Jr. out of his tail’s range.

Tomorrow.

“And how are you holding up?” Technoblade asked, and Ranboo let out a happy little vwoop.

“Good. Um. I’m still friends with Tubbo and Tommy. Therapy is going good, I think. I’ve missed you a lot.”

“We’ve missed you too.”

Ranboo left the play room to curl up on the couch in Technoblade’s cape, which now didn’t smell much like him anymore unless Ranboo pressed his nose to a less-often-touched place and imagined really hard. He told them about Niki’s visit, about the apiary, about the refugees he’d seen coming in. Anything he could think of. Everything he could think of. Every word he could give that would make them stay on the line just a little bit longer.

A small hand shaking his shoulder woke him, neck bent at an awkward angle on the back of the couch and the cape his only blanket in the now-much-darker-room.

“Hey,” Captain Puffy said quietly. “Let’s get you into an actual bed to sleep, okay?”

“Oh.”

He’d fallen asleep talking to Technoblade and Philza. He’d feel embarrassed, if he were awake enough to do so. He let Captain Puffy shuffle him upstairs and into the guest bed, where he once again collapsed, tail tip still twitching involuntarily despite how worn out those muscles were from the wagging he’d been doing all evening.

The next morning, Captain Puffy and he had their final one on one in-person therapy session for the trip. Most of it was just reiteration of what they’d established so far, as well as drafting up a plan

for the future. She wanted him to call her once a week once he got home, and once they had the chance to discuss this with Philza and Technoblade, she wanted him to come in for an in-person visit once every two months, just to stay on the safe side. He couldn't help but feel like that would be burdensome to Technoblade and Philza, who would inevitably need to escort him, but Captain Puffy assured him that with Will living here, Philza would probably be perfectly content to walk him over.

That afternoon, Ranboo excitedly told his friends about Philza and Technoblade coming back, which then led into him informing them that his stay in the Central Kingdom would be coming to an end. He. Was sad, that he wouldn't be able to really see them all that much anymore. But they were synced with his communicator, and Tubbo and Tommy promised to call and talk with him, and he promised to call them too (even though he already knew that it would be Absolutely Terrible to start conversations all on his own).

That evening, he physically could not stop pacing in Captain Puffy's living room, eyes out the front windows, just. Waiting. Walking. Tail twitching and jerking and flicking with crackling energy that he couldn't get out no matter how many lines he walked into her carpet. All his senses seemed overbright, ears braced for the click of redstone, eyes waiting for the outline of a cape, of wings, of a horse or dog or crow.

And then, finally, after two different eternities dragged across the evening, the setting sun caught on a glint of gold and cyan horse armor and Ranboo was out the door like a shot, entirely unaware if he'd even remembered to close it behind him because they were back they were back they were back and Ranboo was colliding with Technoblade's chest with an "umph!"

Philza was giggling, Twitch cawing, and Ranboo could feel Max hopping up and pawing at him but he was squeezing onto Technoblade and letting out every stupid Ender vocalization his body felt like making, chirps and vwoops and hrms and clicks and trills and staticky nonsense and the only thing that stopped his fumbling clawing attempts to get himself somehow closer was when Technoblade's arms wrapped around him in turn and squeezed him back, Ranboo letting out a high pitched, happy whine and burying his face into his shoulder.

"Hey, kid," Technoblade rumbled, a sound both felt and heard.

Ranboo's mouth opened but only a stupid garbled mess of sound fell out, prompting Philza to laugh again, and Philza, Philza, oh! The only thing that could convince Ranboo to stop hugging Technoblade was the fact that he needed, *needed* to hug Philza too and he scrambled out of Technoblade's hold with all the grace of a boneless giraffe and wrapped himself around the tiny bird man, feeling Philza's laughter reverberating through him as he made himself into a ferret-boo and donuted his skinny beanpole body around his friend.

"I take it you've missed us?" Philza laughed, wings and arms surrounding Ranboo as he whined and trilled.

"Yes!" Ranboo keened, smelling the familiar feather-dust scent of his shorter friend and feeling the twitching need to switch back over to Technoblade building underneath his skin. When Philza's wings moved, he did, Technoblade snorting out a laugh as Ranboo's long arms once again encircled him and Ranboo bounced back and forth three more times before he finally knelt down and gave Max some much-desired attention, his skin still jumping and twitching and his tail ceaseless in its wagging. At some point Captain Puffy came outside to say hello and drape Ranboo's forgotten coat on top of him. He did not care.

“Oh but hey, Ranboo,” Technoblade said, and he looked up from the slobbery wolfdog with an inquisitive noise. “We’re not sure if we got the right one, but we did bring you back a gift.”

Gift? “Right” one? Well, now Ranboo was curious. He stood and approached Technoblade, who was flipping open one of the flaps of Carl’s saddlebags. This was a stiff one, something that would retain its boxy shape regardless of what was put in it. As Technoblade stuck his hands in, a meow that Ranboo could only describe as “ladylike” came from the pack, and he pulled out a skinny little calico cat who appeared very disgruntled to be woken from her sleep.

Ranboo couldn’t breathe. Tears stung his eyes.

He stepped forward, then again, arms outstretching despite his disbelief, and he took the cat from Technoblade’s hands. She mrrped, sniffed him twice, and then bonped her head up against the underside of his chin. Ranboo gasped, remembering that he technically needed to breathe for reasons like “staying alive,” and cuddled her to his chest.

“Carnation!”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter count went up again, woooo.

Thanks again for all your love and support for this fic. All your comments continuously make my week <3

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

So I'm back! I have finished this chapter, the next, and most of the final one, so we should once again be on a weekly update schedule until the FINAL chapter count. Only two more after this one <3

Thanks for all your messages, I see all of them even if I don't always have the energy to respond. To let you know what's been going on in my life: A Lot! First my dad called me at 11:30 at night and let me know I had a week to rehome my cat (my current apartment doesn't allow pets) or he was sending him to the humane society. My boy apparently had had one too many accidents on the bed and instead of responding like a rational adult man my father threw a temper tantrum over it. So that was a lot! I was Very Sad as a matter of fact. Having issues going on with my own irl childhood cat made this chapter very emotionally difficult for me to write, as Carnation is featured heavily.

Then my roommate got carjacked and a few days later my car was vandalised, so we've been going through it! We will once again be moving. So. I have that to look forward to in the upcoming month. Yaaaaay.

So yeah it's been a lot. It's been a lot. Anyway, just wanted to give y'all an update/scream into the void. So without further ado: enjoy the chapter <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo laid on his belly on Captain Puffy's living room floor, tail wagging ceaselessly behind him, chin propped up on one wrist while his fingers delicately pet over Carnation's precious little face. He was wearing gloves, on account of her being *slightly* damp, but their faces were just barely far enough apart that his every exhale did not make her whiskers twitch.

She hadn't stopped purring since they'd brought her inside, bundled up in Ranboo's arms and bunting her head against his jaw half-frantically. She remembered him. Somehow, after all of this, she still remembered him. And now she was warm in front of the fire, Philza cross-legged behind her with a bowl of watered down potion of harming and a thin comb, wearing gloves as well.

"For the fleas," he'd said, when he had set the bowl of still-very-harmful liquid away from Ranboo and his wagging tail. He'd rubbed the diluted potion into the little triangles of her ears, to start, getting at any mites, then slowly and patiently worked his way through her coat, detangling her fur as best he could and pulling out burrs as he coated her fur with the mild poison. As long as she didn't try to groom herself while she was still damp, it wouldn't hurt her, and Ranboo was on petting-her-as-a-distraction duty, which. Well. He was going to do that anyway, so win-win.

Technoblade was at the church, enchanting a bottle of water with bane of arthropods. They'd need to get her to drink it to get any potential tapeworm or hookworm or the like dead and out of her system. Ranboo tried to remember if they'd done that for Enderchest, and upon checking his memory book, was surprised to find that they had. Huh! He didn't remember it, but hey, he'd written it down, so. Technoblade had probably just used the enchantment table in the cabin, while Ranboo was sick and sleepy. Just about the only reason Ranboo wasn't currently, actively missing the actual hell out of him was because he had his cat back he had Carnation back he'd never

expected to get her back but she was here, close-eyed and purring so loudly, with gentle hands petting her and combing her and getting the fleas and parasites off and out of her.

His tail was going to be sore tomorrow.

Her little face was so precious. She was so small, so delicate, she had scars and cuts on her. One fresh cut over her nose and up near her eye, thin lines where fur didn't grow that marked old injuries long passed. She was bony; more than small, she was *skinny* in a way that made Ranboo ache. Life had been unfair to her, that she was so thin and so marked up.

Well. Nothing was *ever* going to hurt her again, Ranboo mentally announced. He would make sure of it. Groom her and feed her and keep her from harm. He'd have to be careful about slowly introducing her to Enderchest, make sure the two got to smell each other through the door before saying hello face to face. Reintroduce her to a little "colony" slowly, she'd been a lonely stray for far too long to rush it, but she'd have a home and a family and she'd be warm and safe and well fed and he would look out for her. This precious little creature. The only thing left of the years and years before Technoblade had saved him. Ranboo would do right by her.

"If you don't blink your eyes'll dry up," Philza remarked mildly, and Ranboo blinked twice rapidly. He'd. Forgotten to do that.

"How goes it?" Captain Puffy asked, leaning near the doorway of the livingroom.

"Still no fleas jumping ship to your carpet yet," Philza stated. "Mostly just a lot of tangles and matted fur to work through."

"Okay, 'cause if I get fleas I'm reading you and Techno the riot act."

"You're not going to get fleas," Philza reassured with a bright little chuckle, and Ranboo felt a brief stab of—hm. Not guilt, but maybe agitation? Carnation was his cat, his childhood friend, if Captain Puffy got upset it surely would have to be with him. But she was joking, she was—mostly joking. Ranboo didn't doubt that getting fleas on her sheep legs would be Less Than Ideal. But she wouldn't get *too* mad. Probably.

"You glad to have your cat back?" she asked at a softer volume, and Ranboo made a happy little vwoop without looking away. Captain Puffy and Philza both chuckled at that, and Ranboo switched from petting little lines down her brow to giving tiny little scratches on her cheek.

She "mrrp"ed and twisted onto her back, exposing her belly, and Ranboo and Captain Puffy both *gasped* and she made a high pitched little "awww!" while Ranboo let a truly unintelligible string of noises out of his mouth. Philza laughed again, a little louder, and started defleaing her belly.

Technoblade returned shortly after, glowing bottles strapped to his hip. Ranboo let out another happy vwoop but did not get up or go to him, for all a solid half of him wanted to. The other half wanted to stay right where he was and pet his cat, who was so purry and precious and her little paws had a little white sock on one and a little black sock on the other and she was just *so cute* and he loved her so much.

Captain Puffy didn't want to hear about the trip for "plausible deniability" reasons, so when they finally got Carnation all deflead and had coaxed about half of a little dish of enchanted water into her, the group settled around the table spoke about Captain Puffy's date with Niki and how things

had been on her side, while Technoblade and Philza were gone, since they'd already heard basically everything from Ranboo on that night he'd fallen asleep on the communicator.

Ranboo was silent through all of it, Carnation on his lap with a comb in hand, working through the mats Philza hadn't bothered with. He was leaned against Technoblade's side, red cape draped over Ranboo's shoulder and Technoblade's hand rubbing a warm line up and down Ranboo's arm. When asked a question, he found himself, oddly, *unable* to answer it aloud, instead just giving a little nod of his head before resuming combing Carnation. She was curled up on his legs in a sweet little kitty donut. He was so glad he was bipedal. He was so glad he had a lap to curl up on. He couldn't wait to take her home.

"Ranboo, everything alright?" Philza asked at one point, and Ranboo looked up, frowned, cocked his head to the side (though his tail did not even stutter in his wagging, so ceaseless it was).

"Just that you haven't said a word since we got here."

Oh. Hm. He...

"He might've gone non-verbal," Captain Puffy said, saving him from needing to respond. "You got a lot of big emotions right now Ranboo?"

Ranboo nodded. Yes, that seemed like it. Technoblade and Philza were back and Carnation was here and Ranboo felt very very very good and happy and excited but it was also a lot of, as Captain Puffy had stated, big emotions.

"Yeah he's fine," she said, not dismissively but... unconcerned. It was like a nice kind of dismissal. Positive dismissal. He let out a happy little vocalization.

When night had settled well and fully over the city, Technoblade carefully scooped Ranboo up so as not to disturb the sleeping Carnation on his lap, and carried him up to the guest bedroom. Carnation stirred, yawned, and resettled on top of Ranboo's chest as he was set on the bed, Ranboo making little happy chirrupy noises at her and scratching at her cheeks and back. Technoblade and Philza dressed for bed and joined him, and Ranboo nudged his face up against Technoblade's chin as he was cuddled into a familiar position.

"I'm glad you're back," he said quietly, the words thick and heavy on his tongue but not quite so impossible to form, just then.

"We missed you too," Technoblade said, petting Ranboo's hair. "It's good to be back."

Ranboo let out a happy little vwoop and stroked two gentle fingers across Philza's wing when he stretched it over them.

Technoblade's fingers in his hair slowed, stilled. "Ranboo?"

"Mm?"

"How was therapy while we were gone?"

"Good," he said, trying to shift his brain into making words. Conversation. He'd been practicing that. "I've been practicing conversations. We talk a lot about what happened before you rescued me and a lot about, um, coping mechanisms that are helpful, and that communication is, 'important.'"

Philza chuckled at Ranboo's pouting. "Generally speaking, yeah, it is."

"It's dumb."

Technoblade and Philza both laughed, Technoblade's knuckles bopping against Ranboo's shoulder lightly. "I hear that!" He resumed petting Ranboo's hair. "So you feel like therapy's been helping?"

"Yeah. Definitely."

Ranboo turned his head, his body unable to as he was trapped on his back thanks to Small Little Precious Angel on his chest. Looked at Technoblade. If he was Technoblade, what would he be feeling right now? He tried to piece it together.

"Are you okay?" he asked, unable to bridge the gap himself.

"Yeah. I was a little worried about leaving you here on your own, s'all."

"Oh, that's *all*, is it?" Philza teased.

Technoblade snorted, bapping Philza and making him chuckle. He huffed a sigh, then elaborated, "I was anxious that we'd made you go through all this for something that wasn't even helpful to you and just stressed you out for no reason."

"Oh." Ranboo nuzzled against him as best he could from that angle. "It's helping. It's, it was definitely stressful. And. It takes a lot out of me. But it's helping. I feel—more centered? I think? Captain Puffy is very kind and, um, I think, I've been doing well?"

Technoblade leaned in and bumped his forehead against Ranboo's. "I'm sure you're doing great, kid."

Ranboo chirred at him, leaning into familiar touch, scent, warmth. He fell asleep easily.

Carnation got up in the middle of the night, waking Ranboo briefly, but only padded up onto the pillow to fall asleep on top of Philza's head, and Ranboo let out a quiet "pfft" and curled onto his side, arms holding onto Technoblade, and he slipped back into sleep with quiet swiftness.

Come morning, he resumed fighting with Carnation's mats, and Captain Puffy led them all to her therapy office, Ranboo bringing Carnation along with because she was very sweet and well behaved and he didn't want to leave her all alone in a strange house if he didn't have to.

"So let's talk about Ranboo's mental health!" Captain Puffy started cheerfully as they all sat, and Ranboo was—nervous, but. Maybe also a little proud? He was scared she might suddenly switch her tune and say something bad about him, but he was also... mostly hopeful? That she would remark on how well Ranboo had been doing? Ranboo felt like he was allowed to feel proud about the progress he had made. He felt like that was something he had earned, something he was allowed.

"Ranboo, to start, is there anything specifically you would like to discuss with them?"

"Um, I, think I'm doing better?" he hedged, fussing with a mat in Carnation's fur and his (predictably sore) tail waving.

"Yeah, you're doing great! Very proud of you Ranboo."

Ranboo beamed.

“We’d like to know your professional opinion of where he’s at and what we can best do to help,” Philza remarked, and Ranboo nodded. Yes, yes, he remembered, yeah, that was a thing they’d wanted.

“Honestly? It seems like you two have been doing really well, pending misunderstandings. I’ve asked Ranboo to do this too, but you’ve all gotta ask each other ~clarifying questions!~ If you think there is *any possibility* that you might *conceivably* not be on the same page about something, ask *pointed, detailed* questions about it. Over-elaborate. It will literally be more helpful to over-elaborate than under-elaborate.”

Technoblade made a soft grunt.

Ranboo looked at him. Ah. He was fairly sure he was guessing this one right. “She wants us to use our words.”

Technoblade made a louder, more audibly displeased grunt.

“Me too,” Ranboo sympathized. Philza and Captain Puffy were laughing at them.

“I just think it’s a little much for you to expect me to *socialize*. I mean who even uses their words anymore c’moon. That’s so oldschool.”

“You gotta,” Captain Puffy asserted.

“Imagine utilizin’ *healthy communication*, cringe. Criiiiinge.”

“You still gotta though.”

“I’m with Technoblade on this one,” Ranboo mentioned quietly.

“See Ranboo gets it.”

“Aaaaaaand you still gotta though! Ranboo’s actually been doing really well about piping up when he has questions and sharing his thoughts lately; I’m really pleased with how far out of his shell he’s been coming.”

At her words, Technoblade rubbed an encouraging hand up Ranboo’s arm to squeeze his shoulder and Philza ruffled his hair with a “pogchamp.”

Ranboo noticed, as they discussed what Ranboo needed from Technoblade and Philza, that Captain Puffy spoke rather abstractly. She didn’t bring up many specifics from their therapy sessions, barely anything really. He hesitantly raised his hand and gave her permission, again, to speak with them about whatever she wanted, and she thanked him but kept things... vague. He wondered if this was a ‘privacy’ thing. He wasn’t really. He didn’t. Ah. Hm. Okay.

“Generally speaking, at this stage of development teens mostly just need to have their autonomy respected while still having somewhere safe to come back to and rely on, so I think you two have been doing great in terms of helping him.” Autonomy! Ranboo knew that word. “Establishing yourselves and your home as safe while encouraging him to make his own decisions and judgements should be the goal of teen development in general; due to him having been a slave,

Ranboo just needs a little extra comfort and patience. Or a lot,” she said with a breathy chuckle. Ranboo chuckled as well, cheeks warm. Yeah. Or a lot.

“For his acute freakouts, getting him focused on other things, like with the lemons, is a *great* idea. Detailed explanations of the situation can help circumvent freakouts, as well as clearly establishing your expectations for any given thing. Not pushing too hard or overdoing it is also gonna be important. Ranboo’s a pretty clever kid,” she winked playfully at him, “he’s got a surprisingly decent grasp on his limits, even if he needs a little nudge to get going from time to time.”

“We’ve noticed that as well,” Philza remarked.

Ranboo was torn between blushing and hunching and straightening proudly. Carnation yawned, stretched, stood up, circled, and plopped herself down on her other side. Ranboo was momentarily distracted by the fact that that was so cute he could die.

“...general, he’s come a long way but still has a long way to go. You want to encourage growth but be mindful if he ever says he’s not ready for something. On the flip side, if he says he wants to do something you’re not certain he’d be up for, don’t coddle him either.”

Oh yeah; they were having important conversations. He tugged idly at a small knot of fur, detangling it slowly with his claws, and looked at Captain Puffy’s wooly legs. Her hands were very animated, even in a professional setting.

“We try to be careful of his limits, yeah,” Technoblade said, then turned to Ranboo. “Though you are welcome to let us know at literally *any point* if we’re pushing too hard or have pushed too hard in the past.”

Ranboo considered that. Skimmed over his memory book. Jotted it down that Technoblade wanted to be told if they ever pushed him to do something he didn’t want. “I think, you’ve been very kind and good about that, so far, um, but, I’ll try to make sure to let you know, if that does happen.”

“Pog.”

Then they discussed the schedule Captain Puffy wanted Ranboo to keep with her, calling her once a week and visiting in person once every other month. Philza, as Captain Puffy had predicted, immediately volunteered to be the one to escort Ranboo into the Central Kingdom, as it gave him a regular schedule to come visit his family.

Which just so happened to be the first thing Philza did, when they left the therapy office.

“I couldn’t go see Will before the trip; if he’d known Techno ‘n I were in town he would’ve distracted us. Love him but he’s a bit of an attention hog.”

Technoblade snorted in a distinctly piggy fashion.

“Attention whore, then,” Philza corrected amicably, laughing.

“Do you, um,” Ranboo started, looking at Technoblade (and not Philza’s wingspots as he took off in flight), “also want to visit Wilbur?”

“So,” Technoblade started, face pinched with discomfort. “The thing about Will is that he’s neighbors with this guy.”

“Is it Quackity?” Captain Puffy asked.

“It’s Quackity. And the thing about Quackity is that he’s about Will’s age, and I’ve known him since the two were kids and Phil would try to get them to play together.”

“I think I know where this is going.”

“And nooooow—” his voice was doing the wobbly pitch thing that it did when Technoblade was Feeling it, “—Quackity will uhhhhhh, *compulsively flirt* with everything that moves. Including me! And I just, I, naaah nah nah nah nah. He’s tolerable as a person but I am just really not into. That.”

“Oh.” Ranboo supposed he wouldn’t like that very much, either. “I see.”

Technoblade ruffled his hair. “Will can come say hi at Puffy’s if he wants, or he can come out and visit us back home again.”

“That could be nice,” Ranboo said softly, liking the idea of being able to play with Fundy again too. Well, had they played? They played with the kittens (god he missed the kittens so bad, he instinctively cuddled Carnation closer to his chest) and he, he was *pretty* sure he’d taught Fundy how to milk a cow? Right? He thought he’d done that, he, he was pretty sure. Pretty sure. But he wondered if he’d actually played with the small child. He’d have to check his memory book later; right then his arms were full of cat.

He did not remember to check his memory book later. But he did get through the last of Carnation’s tangles!! Haha!! The three of them also made a dent in the mountain of bread products Technoblade had bought from Miss Niki. Not a particularly notable dent, but a dent nonetheless! It was largely due to Captain Puffy’s efforts, who gleefully remarked on the amount of goodies they’d bought from her paramour.

Technoblade sat with him when Captain Puffy coaxed him into trying long-division again. Technoblade did it a little differently than Captain Puffy did, and Ranboo frowned in concentration as he tried to piece it together. Then Technoblade tried to teach him about Remainders and Ranboo made an undignified noise and buried his face in Technoblade’s thobe. It was a nice thobe. Palastinian-style. Lovely pattern. You know what it wasn’t? Math.

Technoblade ruffled his hair.

“When am I even going to need this?”

“Math is good for keeping your brain active. It’s less about when you’ll need it and more about building neural pathways.”

Ranboo found himself mimicking Tubbo with a, “I know what those words mean.”

Technoblade barked out a laugh. “Math helps keep your brain healthy. Like stretching. Math is brain stretching.”

Ranboo grumbled, but given how yoga affected him he supposed he couldn’t really in good conscious argue that stretching was also stupid.

Fortunately, Technoblade only had him finish the problem he was on before letting him call it quits for the day. Sorry future-Ranboo! Remainders are *your* problem! Captain Puffy ran out to do some

errands and Technoblade said yes when Ranboo asked if he would like it if he read the redstone ballerina story out loud to him.

Ranboo felt, weirdly proud, his back leaned against Technoblade's chest, Carnation on his lap and Max at their feet, reading out loud to his... friend, like Technoblade had read to him. That Ranboo had asked and Technoblade had said yes. That he'd felt brave enough to ask. That he wasn't fumbling over his words too badly. That when Captain Puffy got back home he didn't get too embarrassed and self-conscious to continue. He was proud of that.

"Hey mates," Philza called all three across the coms late that evening, right about when Ranboo was wondering where the man was. "Will and I got to chatting; I'm gonna spend the night over here. Don't wait up."

"Sleep well," Technoblade wished mildly, though Ranboo felt him relax minutely. Maybe he'd been wondering where Philza was as well.

Ranboo didn't actually end up seeing Philza until the following night, and the day after Ranboo went out on his own to meet up with Tommy and Tubbo for theoretically the last time for a while.

"We'll get to see you in two months, though, right?" Tubbo clarified, and Ranboo hummed affirmatively. "And we'll chat between now and then. Maybe there'll be less people around, too."

And that was another reason they needed to leave soon. Apparently Philza and Technoblade looked different when they were. Uh. Anarchy-ing. But they still weren't exactly in a rush to be recognized by the people they'd uprooted.

"That'll be nice. Maybe we could go mining again?"

"Ew! Ranboo, no! Why the fuck would we do that?" Tommy scoffed, and Ranboo flicked his ears back with a roll of his eyes.

"Okay, then, *you* pick something fun to do."

"We could grief George's house."

"I said, something, *fun*."

"You're such a fucking pussy you know that?"

He accepted hugs from both of them when they parted that evening, and a hug from Captain Puffy as well the next morning, when Carl was packed and the city was cast in a blue-grey dawn.

"Have a safe trip!" she wished them, lifted off her hooves by Technoblade's hug and encased in Philza's wings.

"Thanks again, Puffy, we'll be seeing you," Philza said, and the group was off, Carnation cuddled in Ranboo's arms and Max trotting at Technoblade's heels. Twitch landed and perched on Philza's shoulder right before they reached the portal, and Technoblade urged Ranboo to settle Carnation into the sturdy, boxy saddlebag before they went in.

"It's insulated, so she won't overheat in the Nether," Philza explained as Ranboo did, Carnation wiggling as she settled into the small space.

Ranboo, however, was not insulated in the Nether, and the heat was actually painful as he crossed through from the snowy landscape of the Central Kingdom.

This! Was! The! Worst!

When they finally, *finally* reached their portal home, Ranboo was mouthbreathing and one melon slice away from completely out, stressed from their recent encounter with a ghast and just all over tired from the trip. Carl was not alone in his desire to be *out* of this wretched **Nether (derogatory)**.

And then they were home they were home they were home they were home they were *home* they were home they were finally home he took Carnation upstairs immediately and shut the trap door behind her and then he was down in his little room with the grass blocks and there was *Enderchest* and Enderpearl and Jjjjjjeffery and Enderchest was scolding him and sniffing him and rubbing against him in offense at the stranger's scent and she was hissing a little but it was undermined by the fact that she was purring and the kittens had gotten bigger while they were gone which made sense but Ranboo was still shocked to see so much *change* and he was wagging and his ears were perked up and again he wished he could purr but he gathered all three up against his chest and chirped and vwooped and crooned over them and pet them and touched them and he was *home* again finally finally finally!

Oh he should go check on Ranbun!!! It was probably too late in the evening to try and get his cows back to the barn without encountering night mobs that would eat him but!!!! Bunny. He rushed out and pet them and fed them and cleaned up their waste (they kept it all to one corner, good bunny) and checked over their little house and pet them some more, then allowed himself to be summoned back inside by Philza reminding him that it was late and they were all tired.

Enderchest was perched on one of the little wooden shelves they'd built to let her move between the top and main floors, sniffing at the hatch. She meowed at him when he came through the door, pacing shallowly at the end of the plank, and lifted onto her hind legs to paw at the wooden barrier.

"No, you can't meet her yet," Ranboo said, lifting her off the perch and kissing her sweet little head (and getting scolded for it). "You have to get used to smelling each other first, so you don't get stressed out or try to hurt each other. She's delicate, and you're bigger than she is; you have to be nice to her."

Enderchest was not overly pleased by this. He set her down in his room, on top of the first grass block he'd lifted intentionally. Jjjjjjeffery hopped up to harass his mama, and Ranboo chuckled to see that he still had such youthful behaviors.

Hm. They should. Get him fixed. Probably. And Enderpearl. And Enderchest, now that she was no longer pregnant.

...A conversation for later.

Right then, Ranboo had a ladder to climb and a crow to let beak him and pjs to change into and a calico to settle onto the pillow behind his head. He contemplated her as he crawled into bed. His childhood cat, brought far away from where she'd been, not knowing where she was or who these strangers were but Ranboo knowing that she was safe and warm and would be well fed, taken care of, pet and admired and never hurt again. He wished he could tell her, in a way that she would understand. He wished he could inform his cat that she didn't need to be nervous, that things were better now than she might possibly imagine. He wondered if she'd even believe him, if he could

find a way to tell her. He wouldn't have, when he was first brought here. He couldn't *understand* the full depth and breadth of it, even if he'd been told.

But things were different for him now, and they'd be different for her too, eventually. He pressed a kiss to her tiny little head, cherishing her little "mrrp!" and snuggled in between his two. Friends. Their arms and wing encasing him.

It felt strange, once more, to call them friends. Not because he believed the term too intimate, but somehow, somewhere along the line, the word had become not close *enough*.

They weren't his parents. But they weren't just his friends, either. Ranboo wasn't Wilbur, he wouldn't try and insist they were brothers, and 'cousin' was hardly right. But even so. Even so.

They were his

...

Yeah.

They were his family.

"Ranboo?" Technoblade asked, noticing Ranboo's stiffness, a discomfort at the fact that even in his brain, it was difficult for him to admit.

"I'm okay," he assured, "Just. Got to thinking."

A warm, broad hand on his back, stroking slowly. "Yeah?"

"I, um." He rolled onto his back, so that he could reach and hold both Philza and Technoblade's hands alike. His cheeks were hot. He couldn't say it. Could he? He thought it, he. He. Oh god no it was too much too much to say out loud he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't but he wanted to and maybe he wanted to more than he couldn't and maybe he should just go for it so he opened his mouth. And.

"I love you," he confessed quietly, and *oh no* that was too much that was somehow *so much worse* to say it in Commontongue than when he said it in Voidtongue ohhhhh that was mortifying, that was much too mortifying, oh no oh no he let go of their hands to hide his face in his own, tail curling and face *hot*.

"Awwwww, *mate!*" Philza crooned, hugging Ranboo closer, his wing flexing overtop the three. Ranboo made a garbled little noise but leaned into it, nuzzling the side of his (still hidden in his hands) face against Philza's. "We love you too." He paused, then giggled. "Isn't that right, Techno?"

"Hang on a second; I can't hear anything over Chat."

Philza burst out laughing, and Ranboo shifted his hands so his eyes were uncovered, fingers over his temples, hot cheeks still under his palms.

"Um, Chat? May I, uh, ask, you to ease up a little?" Ranboo asked hesitantly, pretty sure that Chat favored him. If he was remembering correctly.

Technoblade laughed breathily, shook his head and rolled his shoulders like he was working out a kink, and then laid a hand on Ranboo's head to ruffle his hair. He pressed his lips to the top of Ranboo's head, and Ranboo vwooped.

"...Love you too, kid," Technoblade said quietly, sounding just about as awkward as Ranboo felt, and he had no idea why he'd chosen *specifically then* to have his little announcement because now he couldn't run away and actually had to fall asleep in bed with the same people he'd just expressed familial affection towards and he was so mortified he could *die* but. But it was nice. That they'd said it back.

"I love you (familial)," he repeated, a little easier, quiet and under his breath, though he knew that they had heard him.

Chapter End Notes

I asked my entomologist friend if tapeworms counted as arthropods and she said no but it's minecraft and also fanfiction so please excuse the scientific inaccuracy.

As always, thanks for reading, and all comments/concrit are welcome and cherished <3

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Following their homecoming, Ranboo found a great deal of what he wanted to do was sleep. He was more or less allowed to, though his waking moments were all very exciting. They got his cows back from the friendly butcher and Ranboo thanked her, asked after how they'd behaved themselves, if they were any trouble, thanked her for hers. Generally made good on his promise to Captain Puffy that he would continue making conversation.

Carnation and Enderchest were allowed to meet face to face about a week and a half in, and Ranboo wasn't sure how they'd like each other, particularly given how prickly Enderchest had been with him, at the start, but she seemed to recognize the other cat as colony much easier than she had Max or... Techno and Phil.

Ranboo had taken to trying to think of them by their nicknames. It was. Weird. Not bad! But weird.

Things hadn't really changed between them, since Ranboo had made his homecoming confession, but on another level some... had. They'd never been stingy with physical affection, but now Phil seemed more willing to treat Ranboo like he had Wilbur, during his visit. Techno helped Ranboo practice math and word puzzles even without Captain Puffy's prompting. But mostly it was in Ranboo's head that things had changed. Things were. A little different. Not in any big way, but. Well, it seemed silly, to keep referring to them by their full names, when they were family.

He still wasn't sure if he would ever get over that. They were family. He had called them family and they'd reciprocated. They brought him home. He'd never been in any danger of *not* coming home. He loved them and felt—somehow, impossibly—he felt certain that they cared for him and wanted him around. Family. He was their family. He wasn't sure if he was ever going to get over that. It had been a month and he still hadn't.

But that also meant it had been a month of him. Thinking. About what Captain Puffy had said, about the idea that it would be better to discuss it while he was composed than try and bring it up when he was desperate. About his. Impulses.

Would they really not be mad? They loved him, they'd accepted him as family. Would they really not be mad?? His therapist had said it would be okay, and that he was allowed to use that as an excuse, or, as part of him explaining himself. Would they really not be mad??? Acting like a slave had always been one of the only surefire ways to upset them and yes obviously they could say no but Ranboo *could* ask. He could ask. Maybe. They wouldn't be mad.

Or maybe they'd wonder what the hell kind of ideas Captain Puffy was giving him and have him stop talking to her. He. It was hard, but, particularly now that they'd bumped down to the weekly schedule, he actually really *liked* therapy. Not while he was actually, actively doing it, because it was. Hard. But he liked the effects. He liked that he liked himself better now. He liked that she was helping make the world a little less hard to deal with. He also just liked her as a person; she was nice.

But maybe they would understand. And if not understand, maybe, at least, they wouldn't be mad?

He wished Eidvryt had been around since their return. He hadn't seen hide nor hair of her. He knew Captain Puffy thought bringing it up would be a good idea, if nothing else just to talk about it, but he was sure that Eidvryt could lend insight to an otherwise frightening prospect.

He sat on the couch with his cats in his lap while the kittens played in his little room, the sounds of their tussling floating through the open doorway. Enderchest was grooming Carnation, and Ranboo cradled both cats in his arms.

Techno and Phil were right there, Phil at the crafting bench and Techno cutting up a melon into bite sized cubes. They were right there. He could ask them. Bring up the idea. Talk about it. Know one way or the other. Maybe even... no, he didn't *need* it tonight, he wouldn't ask, just. Just bringing it up while he was okay, so that if he brought it up while he wasn't okay they'd have a framework to work with—if they even agreed. If they didn't get mad.

Ranboo cleared his throat. "Um, Technoblade and Philza?"

"Yeah mate?" Phil asked, Techno pausing and looking up from the melon.

"Can I... talk about something. Um. Weird?"

"I'm like one minute away from done with this melon, then yes," Techno answered, and Ranboo hummed. Philza dusted sawdust off his hands and pulled over a chair from the table so he could sit in it while facing Ranboo, rather than on the couch itself since Ranboo's legs were taking up most of it. Ranboo smiled at him, though he imagined it must look a little tight.

"Everything alright?" Phil asked softly, Twitch flapping over to land on his hat and peck at him.

"Yessir, um, just. I guess, I—I'll wait for Technoblade to join us, actually."

"Fair enough, and call me Phil."

"No sir."

Philza chuckled and ruffled Ranboo's hair, making him squint up his eyes happily.

Techno pulled up a chair and sat next to Phil, looking similarly concerned but not alarmed. Okay he was doing it he was doing it he was *doing it* no backing out now.

"Um." How to start? "I uh, so, Captain Puffy and I have been. Talking."

"Mhm," Phil prompted gently, Techno nodding.

"And, I wanted to talk with you two about it, when I'm *not* panicking, because I think I will probably be more coherent like this?" He took a deep breath. "Is—and, so, I'm. Hmn." He *really* should have thought about how he'd phrase this *before* he initiated the conversation. "So. I was a slave, for almost all my life."

"Right."

"And, and when I was a slave, I. Acted different. And I wanted—slave things. Because I was a slave, and now, I'm not a slave, but sometimes I still want..." He glanced away from his cats, to their feet, to their chests, eyeing their expressions in his peripherals for any sign of displeasure, any

body language that would indicate he should quit while he was still ahead. But they were just listening, attentive, and he stared at the floor. “Sometimes. I. Sometimes I still want—”

“Hey,” Technoblade interrupted gently, taking one of Ranboo’s hands in his own and Ranboo squeezed it. “That’s understandable, you *were* a slave for most of your life. Like that is very much a thing that happened. It’d be unrealistic to expect you to just drop all’a that.”

Ranboo let out a shaking breath, nodding, relieved. Okay, they understood. They weren’t mad. They weren’t mad that he still had impulses. That was good.

“It’s... worse, when I’m, um, panicking. Or, distressed, I guess. I, I *know* I’m not a slave anymore, but, there are still times when I want to act like one.” Even though he knew they didn’t want him to.

Philza’s fingers brushed his lengthening bangs from his face, though he in no way tried to force eye contact. “Do you want to right now?”

Ranboo glanced down at the cats in his lap. “No, not right now.”

“Okay,” Philza paused, scrutinized him, “Did you think we’d be upset if we knew?”

“Yes.”

Techno squeezed his hand and Phil made a sympathetic noise, ruffling the hair at his nape.

“Okay, so this is you getting this off your chest, and letting go of a false expectation?” Techno clarified. He’d gotten a lot better about asking clarifying questions and verifying his own understanding. It also meant Ranboo had the easiest out he could possibly want.

He didn’t... He wanted to take it, but he didn’t want to take it.

“....Yyyyes,” Ranboo said slowly, “But, I also—and, and I won’t be upset if you tell me no, I should clarify, I absolutely would not be upset—will not be upset, just.” Ranboo took a deep breath. “When I *do* feel bad, and, feel like—like kneeling, or, being treated like how you treat Max, would make me feel less bad. Like, being treated like a slave, would make me feel less bad. Would. Would that be something you’d consider?” he forced himself to ask, voice pitching high and hesitant and tone halfway to an apology. God, what was he *doing*?

“Consider treating you like an object or an animal?” Technoblade asked flatly, and Ranboo cringed, ears pinned back. Of *course* they wouldn’t. He consoled himself with the fact that at least they weren’t mad, though if he pressed his luck Technoblade just might be.

“Sorry, sorry, it was stupid. I shouldn’t have brought it up, sorry.”

“Hey, Ranboo,” Philza intoned. “We’re glad you brought it up. Always feel free to bring things up with us, that is *encouraged*.” He half-said that last bit at Techno, whose lips pressed thin, but he nodded. “We just don’t think it’d be wise to... ah, pretend to dehumanize you. There’s being gentle while you’re adjusting to a new situation and there’s actively taking a step back on the progress you’ve made.”

Sullenly, without knowing why he did it, Ranboo muttered, “Captain Puffy said it was okay.”

“Heh!?”

Ranboo's skin twitched at the outburst, his body feeling like it was crawling and wanting to run away from this conversation actually, but he was already in it so he'd have to finish it out. "When we were talking. Before you left to do anarchy things. I told her about the impulses, and she said. She said it wouldn't be bad, to indulge them once in a while, when I really needed it, as long as it didn't turn into a habit. She said, she said, she said that, um, doing things, that used to be bad and inescapable, when they're not bad and I can stop any time I want to, is a way for brains to. Control? I think? It. She said it better, but, controlling the thing you couldn't used to control makes it... better. And. And sometimes, I really do get more upset, when I can't kneel, and. And if she says it isn't bad, then..?"

He glanced at them hopefully. Phil looked unsure but thoughtful, his brow furrowed with what Ranboo might label as skepticism. Techno looked constipated. And. Angry. And Ranboo looked away again, squeezing Technoblade's hand. They wouldn't hurt him.

"Sorry," he said again. "I should have let it go. Sorry."

Technoblade stood, bumped his forehead against Ranboo's, slipped his hand from Ranboo's grip, and left the cabin without a word. Philza spluttered out a sigh and leaned back in his chair, examining the ceiling. "Ah, Ranboo, I'm just not sure about this."

"I, I didn't, I didn't expect you to say yes. I just." Ranboo rubbed at his face. "I guess I don't know what I was expecting. Sorry."

"It's okay mate. Let Techno get his shit together and we'll talk about it once we've had a little while to think on it. Is it alright if we talk to Puffy about this directly?"

Ranboo nodded, petting through Carnation's fur.

"Alright," Phil said as he stood. He kissed the top of Ranboo's head. "No one's upset with you, okay?"

Well, Techno definitely was, but in a way that Ranboo, though he hated it, would probably survive. "Okay."

"Alright," Philza said, somehow softer, and left the house with quiet steps. Ranboo heard the door to his own house shut moments later, and leaned his head against the arm rest with a cushioned thud. Ughhhhhhhh that was such a bad idea why had he ever let Captain Puffy talk him into it? Why hadn't he just taken the out when he had the chance?? What was going to happen now???

Had he ruined it?

Enderchest crawled up his chest to bump her head against his jaw, and he "pfft"ed and lifted a hand to scratch at her cheeks.

"At least you're fine with all of this."

She flopped down in a little half-donut on his chest, rubbing her face against his shirt, then flipped back onto her paws and started conducting her walkies as he tried to pet her, sometimes meowing.

"You are still *really* not good at being pet!" Ranboo chuckled, spirits lifted somewhat by his goofy cat.

He stayed on the couch until Carnation got up and found something else to do, then got up himself and. He. Put his coat on. He crossed the little stone bridge to Phil's house and hesitated at the door. He'd never needed to knock, before, Phil's house was just as much his home as Techno's was, on account of it technically being sort-of the same building thanks to the bridge and also it being his family member's, but Ranboo also didn't go inside all that often. It was chillier than the main cabin and mostly just used as storage or a place Philza could go to if he needed space.

Ranboo didn't want to intrude on the man needing space.

But... he also heard voices from inside.

He opened the door, stepping in warily. "Philza? Technoblade?"

They weren't on the main floor, and the faint hum of redstone machinery echoed from the basement.

"We're up here, Ranboo," Phil called from upstairs, and Ranboo climbed the ladder. Phil and Techno were seated on an oversized couch that doubled as a one-person bed, if it needed to, and Ranboo was Very Clearly interrupting.

"Sorry, did I... I can come back later?"

"No, come here kid," Techno beckoned, and Ranboo skittered over to join them on the couch, taking the offered place under Technoblade's cape and tail curled around his leg, his arms encircling Techno's in a parody of a hug.

"Okay," Technoblade sighed, running his free hand up underneath his mask. "*IF*, theoretically, either of us does end up agreeing to. Whatever pretending you're a slave would be. What would it entail, *precisely*?"

"It doesn't—it doesn't have to be, pretending, just. The, the actions? That, they're, soothing."

"And the 'actions' we'd be doing are?"

"Kneeling." That was the big one, the one he just couldn't shake. "Bowing, um. When you, when you pet Max, or Twitch, like that, but, with, me. Following orders. Being quiet and out of the way." Ranboo was embarrassed as it was, but he had to hide his face in Technoblade's shoulder when he said, "T-telling me I'm a good boy."

Philza's wing covering brushed against Ranboo's shoulder as he once again encased them all in its warmth, and Ranboo made a small vocalization.

"Ranboo, you are good," Philza stated, and Ranboo let out a little warbling chirr. Technoblade pulled his arm from Ranboo's hold and encircled him, pulling him closer, and Ranboo nuzzled into the hug.

"Okay," Techno grunted. "Okay, none of those are... specifically terrible, I guess. Chat shut up and let me think. I..." Technoblade sighed, ran his hand under his mask again.

"They're not awful," Phil agreed slowly.

"They're not awful," Techno echoed.

“We wouldn’t turn it into a habit.”

“Just, just when I feel, really extra—fragile? I guess? When, when it gets real bad.”

“It would just be when you’re especially vulnerable,” Techno agreed softly, nodding shallowly to himself.

“And, and you don’t have to. I don’t, want to take advantage of how much you’re willing to do for me and then make you upset and uncomfortable, I can, you don’t have to, I can just deal. It’s not actually that important—”

“If it’s important to you, then Techno and I want to at least consider it carefully,” Philza interrupted, and Ranboo nodded into the furred neck of Technoblade’s cape. “And like we said, the things you’re asking for aren’t... terrible. I wouldn’t say we’re totally comfortable and happy about the idea, but we talked with Puffy and she explained it to us a little more in-depth. She’s proud of you for bringing it up all on your own, by the way.”

Ranboo perked. She was?

“So, it’s not something that’s likely to hurt you,” Philza said thoughtfully, “It wouldn’t be a habit and it wouldn’t be anything *too* weird and outside our comfort zones.” Technoblade made a skeptical noise. “I’m not saying it’s in them either, I’m just saying it’s not an impossibility.”

Technoblade seemed to concede to that. “I guess.” He ran a warm hand up and down Ranboo’s back. “Okay, say I’m willing to give it a try—Chat, I will ban you all—say I’m willing to try it. We would need the first time to be while you’re fully conscious of a sound mind. I am *not* doing anything without some sort of practice round.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” Ranboo said hopefully. He’d done much the same bringing it up while he wasn’t distressed, so it made perfect sense. “And if you hate it, we don’t have to.” They always assured him he didn’t have to do things he hated; he should reciprocate, he should do like them.

Technoblade chuckled, squeezing Ranboo briefly. “We’ll let you know.”

“Would we want to do the practice round now?” Phil asked.

“I mean, might as well,” Technoblade shrugged.

“Oh!”

“Unless you don’t want to?” Phil asked Ranboo.

“No! No, I can, right now is good, I just, wasn’t expecting that, yes, I’m happy to.” Ranboo felt his heart rate rising, nervous and excited. They were really too good to him.

“Okay,” Techno paused, “How would we start?”

“Um. Order me to kneel?” Ranboo suggested, head still reeling that this was happening *now*.

Technoblade’s lips pressed thin, uncomfortable, and Ranboo was about to open his mouth and reassure again that really, they didn’t have to, Technoblade was more than welcome to tell him no, when Techno said a single, commanding, “Kneel.”

Ranboo slipped off the couch to the floor in a heartbeat, gratitude swelling in his chest that they would be willing to do this for him. To try at all, even if they decided against it at the end. He knelt gratefully at their feet, between them, but pillowed his arms on Technoblade's knee and bowed his head against the skin warmed cloth of his leg.

Silence, but already Ranboo was relaxing into the knowledge that this was where he was supposed to be, where he'd been told to be. Slow fingers skimmed along his hair.

"Is this... doing something for you?" Technoblade asked awkwardly, leaning forward with one arm braced lengthwise over his legs, the other gently caressing Ranboo's hair.

"Yessir. It's relaxing." Ranboo leaned slightly when Phil's hand joined Techno's in his hair, but didn't move from where he knelt. It felt *so good* to be small and obedient again. To not worry about them seeing him like this, to know that he wanted this, secure in the fact that they wouldn't kick him out and that this was allowed.

"Good boy," Philza tried, and Ranboo vwooped happily, tailtip twitching. He was being good! They sounded like they didn't hate it!

"This is weird," Technoblade whispered. Phil gently cupped Ranboo's face and lifted so he was looking in the general approximation of their chins.

"This is what you wanted?"

"Yessir."

"Call me Phil," he said reflexively.

"Yes Phil," Ranboo answered just as reflexively. Phil blinked, taken aback, and let go of Ranboo. Hm. Maybe Ranboo shouldn't be *quite* so obedient. But, he liked obeying...

"Okay, that's enough weirdness for now," Technoblade announced, bending down and scooping Ranboo up by his underarms. Ranboo crawled into his lap, bumping his head against Techno's jaw, and thought to himself that well, that was the end of that.

"Sorry. Thank you for trying, anyway," he mumbled, doubtless that the two had found his request too strange, too uncomfortable. It *was* worth it, he figured, to at least have it out there in the air, and that now the two would know if he started acting weird during breakdowns, what was going on in his head. He had that at least.

"Yeah, I think *maybe* I could do that to calm you down from a panic, but that's gonna be it," Technoblade said, and Ranboo chirped in surprise. He. Hadn't expected that.

"Thank you," he said, grateful eternally for these kind men who were willing to do so much for him.

"Yeah, that was *deeeefinitely* weird though," Philza remarked, a hand on Ranboo's arm.

"Yes, I, I know. Thank you, um, thank you." He reached up and clasped Philza's hand. "And you're, not mad?"

"We're not mad," Phil and Techno spoke at the same time.

Ranboo nodded to himself. “You’re not mad,” he echoed absently, tail jittering behind him and he pressed his face into Technoblade’s shoulder. “...You’d really be willing to do that again?”

“Only and specifically when you need it for breakdown reasons,” Technoblade said firmly, and Ranboo rushed to nod.

“Right! Right, right, I never, I didn’t expect—um, otherwise, just. Thank you.”

Technoblade carded gentle fingers through his hair. “What about just hugs, though, those help, right? You like those.”

“I do! And, yes, they help, they absolutely do, and, thank you, for, um, holding me, as often as you do. It’s just that sometimes—sometimes I—sometimes it’s—” Ranboo struggled for words. Couldn’t find them in either tongue. “...It’s different for me.”

Philza sighed, giving Ranboo’s hand a squeeze. “I imagine so. I don’t think either of us could ever fully understand what’s going on in your head.”

Ranboo thought of everything he’d gone through—that he could even still remember—to make him like this, and quietly whispered, “I wouldn’t want you to.”

That got him an even tighter group hug and Technoblade carrying him back into the main house, the three of them curled up with the cats reading under a shared blanket.

And then, blissfully, miraculously, things resettled into their routine.

Ranboo would feed and milk the cows, play with Ranbun and Max and the cats, and sneak Twitch birdseed when Phil wasn’t paying attention. He’d go mining and try logging and studied math and word puzzles with slowly-increasing success. He’d read and call Tubbo and Tommy with only some mild nervousness about the communicators and curiously experiment in the kitchen without fear. Techno and Phil did yoga with him in part because they needed it, but also because it helped keep him in the habit, and once a week he’d call Captain Puffy and talk with her for an hour.

Technoblade still had a vault that Ranboo didn’t know about, and Philza still kept their weapons sharp, and he didn’t go with them when they went hunting, but all in all, life was good. There were no surprises. Except, of course, when there were.

“Okay, good news and bad news,” Techno said one day over the group chat, when he’d been out hunting and Philza had been walking Ranboo through the concept of what a “cell” was and how he was made up of trillions of them.

“Are you alright?” Phil asked immediately, standing from his chair, feathers slightly poofed and hand hovering over his sword hilt. He wasn’t shouting. Wasn’t even “tense” really, just, prepared. Ready to go, if he needed to.

“Yes, the good news is that I won.” Phil relaxed minutely, “The bad news is that the polar bear I just fought has a cub. Well, had. Anyway, guess who’s bringing home a new pet!”

“Techno no! Those things are fuckin’ dangerous man!”

“It’s me, I’m the one bringing home a new pet.”

“Like hell you are!”

“I’m naming him Steve.”

“Jesus *Christ!!!*”

Ranboo didn’t see what the big deal was. Technoblade was good with animals, he could probably train it, right?

“Um, how, young is the cub?” Ranboo asked.

“Uhhhhh, weaned.”

“Technoooooooo.”

“He won’t, he, he won’t try to hurt the cats, or Ranbun, will he?”

“I will not let him near them until I’ve got him sufficiently trained.”

“This is a *bad* idea,” Phil insisted. Techno opened the door, giant mound of whiter fur in arm, with a proud “Tadaaaa!” Once more, Phil insisted, “This is a *BAD* idea!”

“I think I know some beast taming enchantments,” Techno mused, shifting the creature’s weight against his hip, “Or at least, know which book to look in for them. That should help.”

Phil’s face was in his hands. Ranboo pat his shoulder.

“Don’t, um, worry, Phil. Techno is very smart.”

He stiffened when they both openly stared at him, the room gone all frozen for a second.

“Um. Uh, wh-what?” Ranboo asked nervously, hair on the back of his neck on end.

“Did you just call us Phil and Techno?” Phil asked, and. Oh.

“I. Guess I did, yes,” he said self consciously, tugging on a lock of hair.

Techno held the cub up in both hands, looking directly at its furry little face. “Already good things have happened in your presence. You are a bear of good fortune.”

Philza laughed boisterously, and Ranboo, shoulders relaxing, chuckled along.

Chapter End Notes

Yes I know that's not how polar bears realistically work but it's minecraft and also he has beastaming enchantments so shhhhhh it's fine

This will probably be the last time for this fic that I advertise my [adult-only discord server](#) for people who enjoy my writing and wanna chat with me and fellow readers. It's a server for all my writing but given how popular FD is, that makes up the bulk of people hangin out in there XD

As always, tell me what you liked, what you didn't, all your Thots <3 I love hearing what my readers have to say about my work!

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Eidvyrt!”

“Ranboo.”

Ranboo rushed across the lantern-lit yard, his hands latching onto the grass block at her abdomen and his momentum carrying him up onto his toes to bonk his head against her chin. He vwooped, chirred, and trilled in a rapid and unintelligible garble, tail wagging his entire body and grinning elatedly.

“It has been a very long time since we last encountered each other! I am happy to see you! I have missed you! I am happy to see you!”

“I am happy to see you as well, little (endearment) Ranboo! I am happy you are safe. I am happy you are here again.”

“We returned...” Actually, Ranboo didn’t know the word for ‘weeks’ in Voidtongue, **“some time ago. I have looked for you but have not seen you.”**

“I have not wandered here in some time. Your residence remained dark and cold like you warned it would. I wandered elsewhere. I am here again. I am happy that you are here, on my return.”

Ranboo crooned at her, tail still wagging jubilantly, her own tail wagging just as fast.

“Tell me about your journey. I assume you were successful.”

“Yes! I misunderstood a lot of what my non-Endermen were telling me. I was never in danger of being given to another to help me.” Ranboo frowned. **“Correction: not never. But not any time recently. Only at the very beginning when my family did not know how to help me, practically-at-all. Since that time they have taken the role of family-caretakers to me and did not know I still thought they might make me leave. I had this explained to me.”**

“This makes me very happy. I did not want you to leave. I am certain you would have bested their challenges, if they had existed, but I am relieved it was a misunderstanding.”

“I am also relieved. I wish I had the confidence you have in me.” Ranboo’s ears perked upright, his tail fwipping somehow harder, **“Oh, Eidvyrt! I made friends! Many of them!”**

He told her of Tubbo, of Tommy. He told her of their antics, the games they played together, how loud Tommy was and how Tubbo would catch him off-guard with his jokes. He told her about Captain Puffy (who he was forced to refer to as just “Puffy,” lacking any kind of synonym for “captain” in Voidtongue), their sessions, how she was helping him with his brain. He told her about Sam, Badboyhalo, Skeppy, and Antfrost, how Sam was patient and had taught him at his knee, how Skeppy’s friendship with Techno was loud and seemed dangerous. He told her about Niki, about

the bakery. He told her about how the people who had hurt Ranboo, before he came here, were dead.

“Good.”

Ranboo chuckled, nerves pulsing through him at the word.

“I do not know how I feel about their deaths,” he admitted, fiddling with his grass block and looking up at the sky. Somewhere in the middle of him telling her everything, they’d wound up on their backs again, staring at starlight. **“I am relieved they can no longer hurt me. I am relieved they can no longer hurt anyone else. I am glad Technoblade and Philza would go to extremes to protect me. I suspect they would have killed them anyway, even if they had never met me. I am relieved they are dead, but... I do not know. I do not know. I suppose I am conflicted over nothing. They hurt me, and I am relieved they are dead. But...”**

Eidvyr reached out and set her hand on top of Ranboo’s grass block.

“You are allowed to have confliction. I do not understand it. You do not have to justify it to me.”

“Thank you.” Ranboo examined her hand. The long fingers, the thin velvety fur. **“Eidvyr?”**

“I am listening.”

“How do you tell the difference between love (familial) and love (platonic) and love (romantic) and love (affectionate)? Do Endermen have a way of knowing for certain?”

“...”

Ranboo watched the stars as she contemplated, feeling the cold wind blow across them.

“Your question is strangely (puzzling) phrased, little (endearment) Ranboo. I do not know how non-Endermen would know for certain. I cannot understand how anyone would know. Love (platonic, romantic, affectionate, familial, any, all) is defined by those who feel it, together. It is familial if the Endermen call it love (familial). It is romantic if they call it love (romantic). It is affectionate if they call it love (affectionate). It changes when they choose. It is a decision made by two or more people. Endermen know by talking. Do you seek a way to know for certain without talking?”

Ranboo took a deep, deep breath, and let it out in a heavy huff.

“I do not like having to talk honestly about my feelings.”

Eidvyr laughed, loudly. Ranboo’s face heated, and he grumbled something about everyone wanting him to *talk* all of a sudden. She patted his hair.

”You will have to acclimate yourself to the idea.”

“My guidance-mentor Puffy told me the same thing.”

“Your guidance-mentor seems helpful and intelligent, from what you have told me.”

Ranboo opened his mouth to respond but his entire body convulsed with a shiver, and he noticed he'd been doing that for a while, actually.

"You are cold. I will return you to your dangerous non-Endermen family. We will speak more another time."

"Okay."

Ranboo rose, stiff and slow with cold, and shivered brusquely as he shook himself, ridding his hair and back of the snow. He'd been so happy to see Eidvyr again, he'd completely ignored his body's signals that he uh. Wasn't actually doing too hot. His fangs clattered.

She noticed that he was slower, watched his feet and legs as he tried to keep up with her. She did not stop at the foot of the stairs, like she had last time, but ushered him up them, opened the door with her long hands and gently pushed him through them, then teleported inside next to him, giving both Phil and Techno a jolt.

She ignored them, ushering Ranboo towards the fireplace, scolding, **"You should inform me when your half-body is affected by temperatures. You are delicate. You should not have been in cold temperatures for as long as you were."**

"Sorry," he mumbled, sitting cross legged in front of the fireplace, ears half-mast with embarrassment at being fussed over. Philza and Technoblade were Very Intentionally not looking directly at them.

"What else will help?"

"Um, cloth covering that traps in my body's heat, like, um," Ranboo pointed to the blanket draped over the back of the couch. She picked it up, handed it to him, and he wrapped it around himself.

"Does he want somewhere to sit?" Techno asked.

"Oh, uh," Ranboo turned from him to her, **"He asked if you would like somewhere to sit?"**

"If he has something in mind, I would express gratitude for it."

"Yes please, and thank you."

"What would he even fit on?" Phil asked, carefully eyeing Eidvyr in his peripherals, never facing her fully or looking above her abdomen.

"How does he feel about rowboats?"

"Uh. Probably, neutral?"

Technoblade went down the ladder, back up, and set a boat out from his inventory. Eidvyr examined it, sat inside, and thanked him.

"Thanks," Ranboo translated, tail still wagging underneath the blanket. "This is exciting. We're all in the same room."

"Yeah, is he sticking around?" Techno asked.

“Are you intending to stay for long?”

“No. Only long enough to ensure that you are well.”

“I am fine. I will warm slowly, but I am in no danger.”

“You moved slow and uncertain like a wrong-dead thing (zombie). I will wait until your fangs stop snapping.”

“Okay.” Ranboo turned to Techno and Phil. “No, I was just, um, stiff from cold, so now **Eidvyr** is worried about me. Once my teeth stop chattering it’ll just be us three.”

“Sounds good. He’s welcome to hang about as long as he likes,” Phil said, and Ranboo relayed it. He asked her to tell him about Enderchildren, how they normally looked and how to tell them apart from adults, if not by height, and leaned against the wall near the fireplace as his body slowly grew heavy and difficult to support his own weight. He listened to her speak, humming along here or there to prove he was still listening, letting out sleepy vocalizations and toying with the texture of the blanket, and the next thing he knew he was being picked up, blinking sleep from his eyes.

“Your friend needs to head home,” Techno told him softly, and he mrrped and looked around, saw Eidvyr at the door. “Tell him goodnight, and let’s go to bed.”

“Oh. Thank you for staying with me, Eidvyr. I hope you are safe until the next time I see you. I hope to see you again soon.”

“I am glad to have seen you again. I also hope you are safe until our next meeting. I also hope to see you again soon.”

“My family pass on their wishes for your safety as well,” he said, not knowing how else to translate “goodnight.”

”In return, I hope for theirs as well.”

“Goodnight to you two, as well,” Ranboo relayed, and Techno and Phil jumped a little when she teleported out of the cabin, off once more to go wander somewhere. Ranboo snuggled into Technoblade’s hold. She’d be back soon enough, now that she knew Ranboo was here again.

A week before they needed to return to the Central Kingdom for his in-person therapy visit, as well as seeing Wilbur and Fundy and also Tubbo and Tommy, Ranboo was out mining. More specifically, he was on his way home from mining. He’d found a fairly impressive vein of gold ore, that trip, and Technoblade had been mentioning again lately that he was looking for the material.

“Techno!” Ranboo greeted when he got inside.

“Downstairs,” came Techno’s reply, and so he descended the ladder.

“Hey Steve,” Ranboo greeted the harnessed and leashed cub, rubbing a friendly hand against his head. His fur was *such* a good texture. “You behaving?”

“He’s getting there,” Techno said easily, snapping and pointing at the ground. Steve’s attention was held by Ranboo, who was new and interesting, and Techno snapped and pointed again, his hand guiding the cub’s butt to the floor. “Slowly, but he’s getting there.”

Ranboo flopped down on the floor and draped his lanky body over Technoblade's back, earning him an affectionate snort.

"You good?"

"Mhm," he hummed pleasantly, his tail idly lifting and slow falling back down. "Cuddle me?"

"Pft, I dunno, I can't really tell if you want that or not," Technoblade joked, already shifting.

"Cuddle me." Ranboo felt silly and more than a little stupid, to be making demands like this, but Techno took no offense, simply took Ranboo under his cape and put his fingers in Ranboo's hair. Ranboo trilled happily and hugged Techno back, bunting his head against the underside of Techno's jaw.

"Y'know, I think the therapy's been really helping."

"Yeah?"

"You get any stronger willed and I'm going to have to start calling you 'Sassboo' or some nonsense."

"Oh." Ranboo pondered that. He hadn't intended to be *sassy*. But, eh, they were already in a playful mood. "You should call me that now actually. Or Bossboo. I'm in charge now >:3"

"How did you do that with your mouth?"

"I found gold while I was mining."

"Oh, pog, pog. Mind sharing some?"

"I was just gonna give you all of it," he said, handing it over.

"I appreciate it. I'll get started on melting this down." Techno examined the lanky Enderboi draped over him, more or less pinning him to the floor lest he moved him. "Steve, hey, Steve, put this in the furnace so we can get the actual gold out of it."

Steve did not put the raw ore in the furnace.

Techno clicked his tongue as though in disappointment. "Look at this guy. Can't even put ore in the oven. Crrriiinge. Chat, Chat get 'im." Despite what he said, Ranboo had full view to Techno affectionately petting down Steve's fur, making the cub wobble over and prop up two paws on Techno's crossed knee, sniffing.

"No, no treats unless you're good and behave yourself," Techno scolded mildly, so mild it hardly counted as scolding. Ranboo grabbed Techno's wrist, guided his hand up, and plopped it down on top of his own head. Techno "pffft"ed out a laugh, and resumed scratching.

"I get it, Iiii get it," he huffed, scritchng a little harder behind Ranboo's ear and making his tail wag. "Do you maybe wanna move this upstairs so we're sitting on a couch and not, y'know, the floor?"

"I like the floor. The floor is a friend."

“Kids and your joints,” Techno huffed, but did not force Ranboo to move. Ranboo felt a twinge of guilt at that, though. If the stone floor was hard on Techno, Ranboo should be considerate. He stood, extended an arm down to help Techno to his feet, which Techno took.

“Okay Steve, you get outta class early today. Be sure to be nice to Ranboo as thanks.”

“He’s always nice to me,” Ranboo said, stooping to give Steve a little pat on the head.

“He better be,” Techno huffed, and set the gold in the furnaces before they went upstairs. They spent the evening hanging out quietly in each other’s space, reading with Ranboo’s head pillowed on Techno’s lap.

It was about halfway through the week that Ranboo discovered what Techno had wanted the gold for. Phil had been taking him out, distracting him, making sure that he was occupied outside of the cabin ever since Ranboo had brought Techno the ore. At first, he’d assumed Phil was just spending time with him. Then it felt like they’d been doing this a lot. Then he checked his memory book and discovered his impression was correct.

What was going on? Were they hiding something from him? Hiding him from something? Was there something he wasn’t allowed to know about? Was this another anarchy thing? Well, Captain Puffy had told him if he had questions, he should ask.

“Phil?” he approached as Phil restrung his bow, startling slightly when a clump of snow fell off a nearby branch.

“Mm?”

“Is there something going on in the cabin that I’m not allowed to know about? Because, um, if you want me to, not be there, you can tell me, I, you don’t have to follow me to make sure, I’ll stay out until you call me home.”

“Naw, mate, no need to go alone. I like hanging out with you. But yeah, Techno’s workin’ on a surprise.”

“A surprise?” Ranboo’s ears perked. He was. Unfamiliar, with surprises. The good kind, anyway.

“Just some pig instincts he’s got. Don’t worry about it.” Philza ruffled his hair and Ranboo chirped, oh but now he was curious.

“What’s the surprise?”

“If I tell you, it won’t be a surprise anymore!”

“Oh.” That was true. “What if I guess it?”

“I’m not going to tell you, Ranboo.”

“Is he, is he, is he,” Ranboo tried to think of a surprise that would take multiple days to prepare. “Is he building something? Like, like another room?” Maybe in the basement?

“I’m not telling, but no it’s not another room.”

Oh ho ho, but Philza HAD just told him something. The game was on. “But he could be building something, though.”

“Ranboo, I’m not telling you.”

“Is it,” hm, “Is it a bookshelf?”

“Oh here we go.”

Ranboo kept guessing. He kept guessing all through them hunting a wild pig, butchering it into inventory-sized pieces and letting twitch peck at the heart, tearing it into bird-sized bites. He kept guessing all through fishing, likely scaring off some of the fish. He kept guessing all the way home.

“Techno we’re on our way back, I made a mistake.”

“What happened?”

“Ranboo knows we’re planning a surprise for him and he hasn’t stopped fucking guessing,” Phil laughed, which helped settle Ranboo’s everburning nerves that he was being annoying. But Phil wasn’t annoyed. He seemed amused.

“Is it another bell?” Ranboo guessed, remembering the gold he’d gotten back at the start of all this.

“I’m not fucking telling!”

“Good guess though,” Technoblade praised, and Ranboo lit up like a hound on a scent.

“So it’s something similar to a bell?”

“Technoooooooo,” Philza groaned/warned, the vowel shaking with tense chuckles at the end.

“Is it,” he tried to think, “A jukebox?”

“Oh I get it now,” Techno said, and Philza laughed.

“You encouraged him! Why would you encourage him?”

“I’m actually just about done. Depending on how far out you two are, it should be finished by the time you get back.”

Ranboo’s ears were flagposts, his tail wagging. “We can hurry.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“I would like to.”

“Nahh, that’s not necessary.”

Ranboo was urging Phil forward, Twitch all aflutter at whatever excitement was happening.

“We can hurry, knowing you you’re probably already done and just inspecting it for imaginary flaws.”

“Inspecting what?”

“You will *see* when we get *home!*” Philza scolded, laughing. Ranboo felt a brief dampen to his mood at the tone, but bounced back pretty much immediately.

“I will see. You could also tell me so I can hear right now.”

“Okay I’m hanging up.”

Techno clicked off before Ranboo could ask him to stay, question him further, and he kept rushing ahead then pacing back to Phil the whole trip home. He was all but *certain* that Phil was deliberately dragging his feet about it. Jerk. Nyeh.

Once they were inside the lantern’s protection he left Phil in the dust, bolting in, and Philza laughed and caught up to him instantly with a flap of his wings. Jerk! He HAD been deliberately slow! Ranboo pouted at him, then, daringly, stuck out his tongue.

“Techno, we’re back!” Ranboo announced as soon as he was through the doorway, and Technoblade’s hooves stopped their clopping as he turned to them and accepted Ranboo bolting into a hug, looking up over Techno’s shoulder to see if he was hiding it behind his back and scanning his person for what the surprise could possibly be.

“Good to see you too,” Techno chuckled, and Ranboo tugged on his cape.

“What’s the surprise?”

“Feeling very loved and appreciated right now,” he teased sarcastically.

Ranboo bumped their foreheads together with an, **”I love you (familial).”** Techno ruffled his hair. Ranboo bit his lip, hedged, shifted on his feet back and forth. Was it okay for him to ask again? He wanted to ask again but he didn’t want to make Techno feel *actually* unappreciated right now, and it didn’t feel polite, but he also *really wanted to know* and—

“So, I’ve been working on something,” Techno started, and Ranboo wanted to interrupt and ask questions and hasten him but he knew Techno needed to take his rambling time but also Ranboo was just so curious!!! “You know how Phil and I have matching earrings?”

“Is it an earring?” Ranboo blurted.

“No, but like, we’re marked out? I guess is what you’d call it? Anyway, anyway, Phil and I have stuff that makes us matchy. Phil’s got the wing covers specifically for you. I guess I kind of wanted to make you something that’d, I dunno, mark out the two of us as being related?”

Ranboo nodded vigorously with an “Mhm-mhm?” Matching with Technoblade??? Yes?????????? Technoblade had made him something and he’d made it specifically so that they could match??? Ranboo could die??????? He was so excited he was so curious he was so *excited!!!*

“It’s also just kind of a pig thing,” Technoblade muttered, “So like, don’t feel bad if you don’t want to wear it, I mostly just wanted to make it for you, you can put it on a shelf in your room or something if it’s too cumbersome or uncomfortable or something but I—”

“Techno just give him the damn gift,” Phil interrupted, and Ranboo’s tail was wagging so hard his body waved side to side a half inch with each wag.

Techno huffed, then pulled from his inventory a thin, intricately patterned crown.

Ranboo's breath caught in his throat.

He took the gold from Techno's outstretched hands slowly, scarcely believing what he was seeing, what he was touching. The metalwork was fine, clearly made by someone with mastery of the skill, and a great deal of time. Small gemstones were embedded sparsely along its outer rim, each cut and polished beautifully. It was not the same as Techno's, they were not identical in the way that Techno and Phil's earrings were, but it was *clearly* the spiritual successor to the crown that Techno wore on his head.

And this—a *crown*!! It was a mark of importance, royalty even, a visual signal of high standing, of worth. That a slave would even touch such a thing except to clean it was absurd. But Ranboo was no slave. Hadn't been for a while, now. He was a beloved and cherished member of this family, and here, unmistakably tied, was a physical representation of that.

"I think he likes it," Phil remarked, and Ranboo had to hold his breath and cover his mouth with one hand lest he cry from it.

"Techno, this is—" he cut himself off, tears threatening, but he didn't want to cry, not from something happy. He didn't want this memory to be tinged with pain. "This is beautiful," he gasped out, blinking rapidly.

"Yeah? You like it?" Techno asked. "I mean, it's nothing really, just something I threw together, you don't gotta get all *emotional* about it, I mean, I wouldn't even expect you to wear it all that often even—"

"I'm never taking it off," Ranboo interrupted, grasping the crown with both hands once again.

He lifted it above his head, and settled it against his brow, hair squishing flat against his scalp underneath its weight. It fit perfectly, made specifically for him, and it felt *right*, more than just the fact that it was made for him, maybe he was meant to wear it.

He lifted his eyes, the new weight strange yet welcome on his brow, and smiled at his family.

"Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

And so the behemoth ends! Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU to everyone who has stuck with me this long. I started writing this back in February, and I am just amazed by the love, the reception, the feedback that this has received. I truly poured my heart into this fic and I have had that answered back a thousand times by all you lovely readers, I don't know if I can express what this fic and all y'all have meant to me.

Many of you have noticed that I have made this fic into a series. There will be a couple more parts, mostly just some one-shots and ficlets I've had bouncing around in my head. Deleted scenes, flashes of the future a few years down the line, some Techno POVs, stuff of that nature. If that's of interest, go ahead and give the series a subscribe, just know it won't be updating nearly as regularly as FD itself did.

I know uploading the final chapter on the same day as a Techno stream is probably counterproductive for the impact I'm attempting to have, but eh, cest la vie.

As always and ever, your comments are a delight to read, and I am interested in hearing all of your thoughts on the final chapter, my fic as a whole, concrit you might have, lay it on me <3

And, once again, thank you.

Works inspired by this one

[sometimes, Phil, kidnapping is okay](#) by [eternalempires](#)

[House of Memories](#) by [Predy1](#)

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